

Strike shuts down Catholic board

First day of school on hold for 50,000 students as separate school teachers walk off the job

BY PATRICK CASEY
STAFF WRITER

York Region's 2,700 Catholic teachers are on strike this morning, cancelling the first day of school for more than 50,000 elementary and secondary students.

Mediated talks between the separate board and the local unit of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association broke off early Friday morning after three days of negotiations failed to avert a strike.

District president Ihor Baczynsky notified the board his membership would withdraw its services as of 5 a.m. this morning, as teachers set up picket lines at schools across the region.

"We were miles apart," Baczynsky revealed on Friday. "It's disappointing the board wasn't prepared to budge."

"During the last three hours, we were not even negotiating at all, the board was just saying no to everything we proposed. Whenever we heard the word 'flexible' from the board, it just meant

they want a free hand over us."

"It's almost like they see us as indentured servants," he added. "The only areas we would have had any kind of right is the areas the board wanted to dole out. They are still hiding behind the government and playing smoke-and-mirrors with staff."

The teachers' current collective agreement expired Aug. 31 and the major bargaining issues revolve around a reduction in preparation time and an extra instructional period for high school teachers.

Baczynsky said the union slashed its salary demands by a percentage point, seeking a 6.5-per-cent hike over the next two years.

Separate board vice-chairperson Elizabeth Crowe admitted a deal was never within reach, although board officials offered on Thursday to set aside the cantankerous secondary staffing issues in order to deal with the elementary panel.

"We said, 'Let's deal with the elementary issues so those schools



ELIZABETH CROWE
Board vice-chairperson

can open on Tuesday. We were willing to sit there all weekend and come up with a deal," Crowe said.

"They clearly said no. They would not split up their unit and said all the teachers would go on strike together."

Baczynsky said negotiations

could have continued if the board had given written protection for 556 non-classroom teachers for the next two years and maintained secondary timetables at six instructional periods a day.

Crowe countered that the board guaranteed the 556 teaching positions for one year while negotiations continued.

However, keeping the high school status quo would have cost the board an additional \$7 million a year in salaries.

"I think we bent over backwards trying to accommodate them," she stated. "We're already paying our teachers more than \$4 million above what the province allocates to us."

The region's 72 elementary and high schools will be open today, but classes have been cancelled.

Buses for the Catholic students will not be operating and Crowe is urging parents to keep their children at home, if at all possible, although schools will be staffed by principals, vice-principals and support staff.

The union will be distributing passes to parents of children attending school daycare centres, assuring them they won't face delays at picket lines while dropping off or picking up their kids, said Baczynsky.

It's the second strike by OECTA members in nearly a year, after teachers missed 15 school days last winter during a two-week contract strike and another five days protesting Bill 160.

With three children set to head off to Our Lady of Grace Catholic Elementary School in Aurora, Gwenda Trimble said teachers will find it difficult drumming up public support this time.

"This is complete and total devastation and I cannot support the teachers," said the angry mother. "Most of the issues under Bill 160 are a fait accompli. It's done, so get over it."

"Just get in the classroom and teach the kids. The teachers had our support last time, but the parents I have talked with are not on their side now. We are fed up."

REGIONAL AFFAIRS: An Aurora hardware store owner, whose taxes have nearly doubled, wants to picket the region's Newmarket headquarters

Businessman calls for region-wide tax protest

BY RICK VANDERLINDE
STAFF WRITER

Outraged York Region business owners — some hit with 300-per-cent property tax hikes — will be staging a protest at the regional headquarters Thursday morning.

Aurora hardware store owner Mike Evans, who organized a similar protest at Aurora council, is calling on colleagues from across the region to picket the headquarters at 9:30 a.m.

"We're all being taxed unfairly and unjustly," Evans said. "A lot of businesses have seen their taxes jump through the roof. We have to tell regional council how we feel."

Evans, whose taxes nearly doubled to \$11,000, wants regional politicians to hear "loud and clear" that business owners need help.

New tax rates, combined with a province-wide market value assessment system, have created skyrocketing business taxes across the region.

Downtown Markham business owner Polly Mpermeracis is calling on hard-hit neighbouring businesses to join the tax protest.

Her store, CM Furs, has been hit with a 130-per-cent hike, increasing her taxes from \$4,500 to \$10,500.

Mpermeracis has no quarrel with her new property assessment but can't believe the huge tax bill isn't being phased in.

"We need a bit of leeway like they got in Toronto," she said. "We're willing to take our medicine, but they are poisoning us to death."

Already deluged with angry phone calls, regional politicians aren't waiting for Thursday's protest to take action.

Markham Mayor Don Cousens, the region's finance chairperson, wants provincial treasurer Ernie Eves to let York delay forwarding \$250 million in education property taxes to the province for up to nine months.

That money, he said, could then be used to provide a temporary reprieve by allowing the region to phase in property tax hikes.

"This is a horrendous increase," Cousens said. "We have small businesses that can't cope and people on fixed incomes who are in fear of losing their properties."

Cousens added that neither local municipalities nor the region are willing to dip into reserve funds to fix a "province-made problem."

He said the province has already helped Toronto, Hamilton-Wentworth, Ottawa and Halton Region with special funding.

But York Region's MPPs insist regional politicians were given a number of "tools" to ease the burden of property reassessment.

Those "tools" included a 2.5-per-cent tax cap for three years, creating more tax classes, phasing in assessments, and providing tax rebates to businesses.

But municipal politicians argue the tools are "made-for-Toronto" solutions that don't work in a diverse regional municipality.

Region 'left with problem,' MPP

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and even 200 (per cent), said Emmerson.

The situation is not being ignored, insists Munro. There's nothing to gain in pointing the finger of blame," said Munro.

Under the new Ontario fair tax system, municipalities are provided with several tools which can help implement tax hikes over a "fair and manageable transition," Munro explained.

"York Region didn't take advantage of it," she said.

"Other tools such as graduated tax rates for commercial properties were introduced in June '97 and tools such as rebates and optional classes were also introduced in March '98," said Munro.

Education is the culprit, argued Emmerson. The big increases hit the commercial and industrial business sector because under the new system, it absorbs a larger share of the education tax burden,

he said.

According to Muscat, "the system is out of whack."

"Everyone along here (Aurora Road) is looking at their taxes doubling. And, of course, this has devalued our property. Who would buy one of our businesses with this kind of a tax burden?"

While local Chamber of Commerce treasurer Helene Johnson is encouraging people to appeal their assessment, she's questioning why the business sector shoulders education cost.

"I don't understand it," said Johnson. "Education should be more the responsibility of the residential taxpayer."

Johnson is also asking why York Region didn't use all the tools available. "We have to look into this," she said.

"This was a decision made by the region and now it's left us with the problem," Munro said.

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