

EDUCATION: Public elementary teachers take a strike vote



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEN

Hundreds of public elementary school teachers gathered in Markham late yesterday to begin voting on whether or not to give their union a strike mandate to back up their demands for a new contract with the region's public school board.

Teachers set to send a message

Union representing 2,800 public elementary teachers seeking decisive strike vote

BY JENNIFER BROWN
STAFF WRITER

The decision is up to them, but York Region's 2,800 elementary teachers have been asked to deliver a decisive message to their union and their employer.

Teachers gathered at a Markham banquet hall last night to cast their ballots on whether to give their union a strike mandate. Those who didn't vote last night can do so today in Newmarket and Aurora, with a final result to be announced tomorrow.

The outcome will not be affected by the province's back-to-work legislation since it only applies to eight school boards already on strike. Separate legislation would have to be approved if and when York teachers go on strike.

Union officials are confident they will get a strike mandate in York.

"I have every confidence in our teachers. The issues are very real — otherwise we wouldn't be at this point," said Phyllis Benedict, president of the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario. "The choice is theirs — we are just asking them to give a message to the board."

And despite local teacher concerns that the strike vote has come too soon, Benedict said the vote is something most unions — including York Region's public high school teachers — did at the end of June.

Most unions negotiating under the Labor Relations Act take a strike vote at the

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— PHYLLIS BENEDICT,
elementary teachers' federation president

outset and take that to the table," said Benedict. "But each of the team's goals is to get a collective agreement — not to take them on the street."

Under a deal proposed by the board, teachers would lose 40 minutes of prep time a week and receive no salary increase.

But there are union concerns the board wants control over other working conditions and salaries.

The choice may be up to teachers, but they have lost their local voice.

All attempts to contact local union president Pam Gillan are being referred to Benedict, now the official spokesperson for York Region elementary teachers.

Gillan said yesterday that all questions must be made through the union's Toronto office.

Benedict said it is not uncommon for a union's provincial takeover team to assume the duty of commenting to the press, espe-

cially when the situation becomes intense.

"It is not unusual for myself to be responding to the press when we get into situations like this."

"We find when negotiations heat up, it is easier for me to take the heat as opposed to the local people," said Benedict, pointing out she is also been official spokesperson for teachers at the Halton public school board.

"They refer everything to me," said Benedict, adding it relieves local representatives from having to make statements that might cause ill will after the dispute is over.

"I don't like negotiating in the press but I'm usually very careful. We don't want two sides negotiating in the press," she said.

Benedict pointed to a school board ad in weekend newspapers as being an example of doing just that.

"It's not something we've done," she said.

In the ad, the board states that salary, benefits and working conditions remain exactly as they were on the first day of school. There have been no changes — and we are not seeking any further changes."

That message appears to be in response to union allegations that the board is planning an attack on teacher salary grids.

Meanwhile, high school teachers in York Region returned to the bargaining table today with negotiators from the school board.

The session is a continuation of talks that began Friday.

Teacher morale will be low: union leader

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instructional time for each credit and those targets will be difficult to achieve.

On Friday, associate director Jack Cronin sought input from high school student representatives and he met with secondary school council executives last night.

Trustees are to finalize recommendations at a special meeting next Tuesday night in Aurora.

Lengthening the school day and extending school into July are two alternatives endorsed by Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association district president Ihor Baczynsky.

But Crowe says she doesn't see much merit in either of those scenarios.

"There's a lot of problems going into July, especially when the parents feel we are just punishing the children," said Crowe. "It would also impact on the amount of money students can raise in summer jobs, especially those saving for university."

Extending the school day cost the separate board \$70,000 a day because it would have to run buses at different time than the public board.

"I think morale is going to be very low when the teachers go back. The government and school boards have got together to put this legislation together," said Baczynsky, who is angry that the union has not been asked to provide advice on lost days.

WORK-TO-RULE

He said the union won't be telling teachers to take job action when they return to class, but some union members have asked about the minimum requirements of the job — suggesting they may attempt an unofficial form of work-to-rule.

Under the Education Act, teachers are required to be at school 15 minutes before the start of the first class and must remain at school for at least 15 minutes after the final bell rings.

Details of Johnson's 17-page bill also include:

- Disputes will be sent to arbitration if local deals cannot be reached.

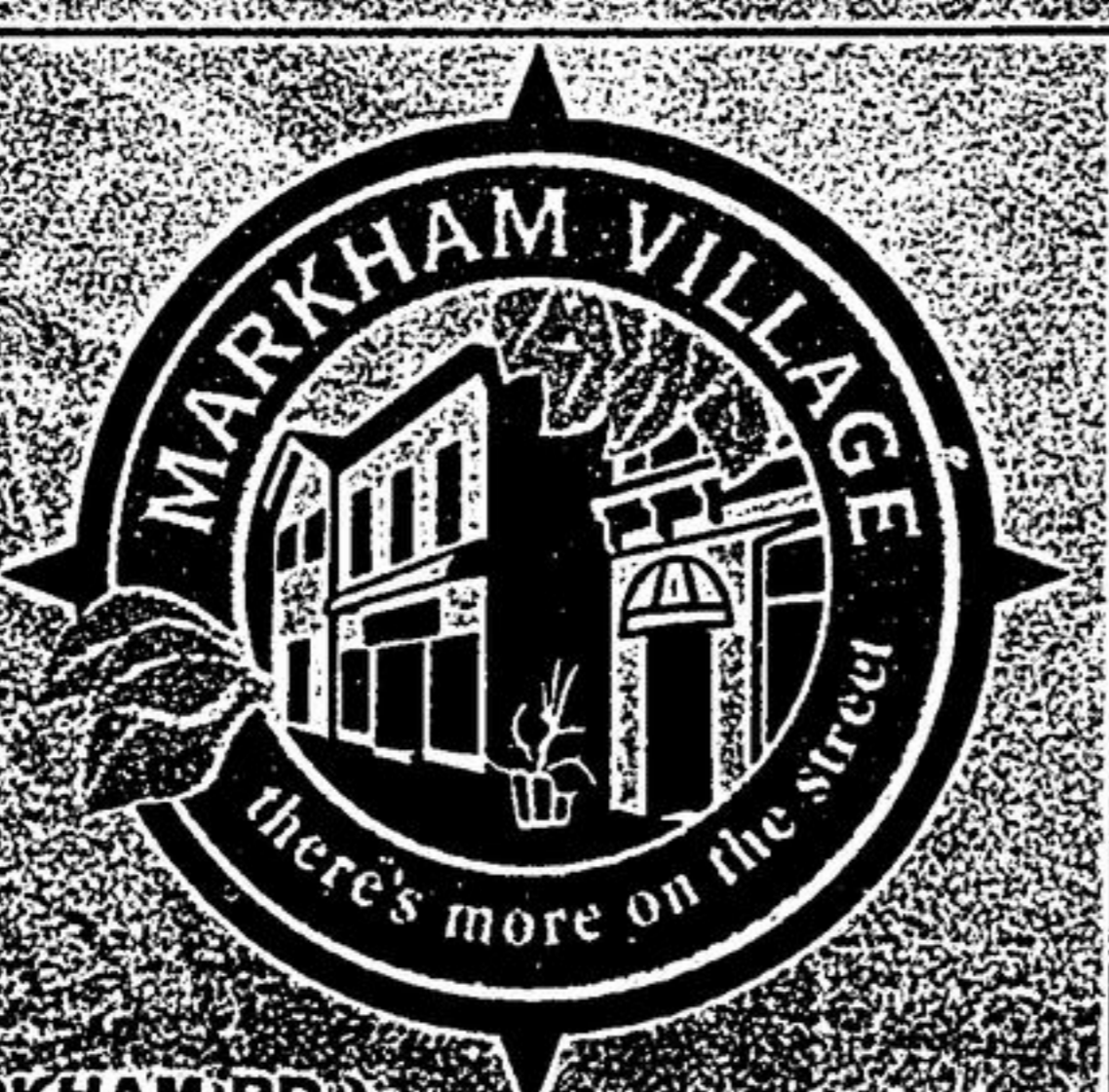
- Teachers' working conditions will be set by the school board until a new collective agreement is reached. Salaries and benefits will be no less than those in the previous agreement.

- Failure to comply with the legislation brings fines of up to \$25,000 a day for a union or school board and \$2,000 for individual teachers who refuse to go back to work.

The bill does not cover future strikes or lockouts that may arise, nor does it affect rotating one-day strikes.

Public elementary teachers are taking a strike vote this week and public high school teachers have already staged one day-long strike.

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