

Town, employees at loggerheads

BY MARTIN DERBYSHIRE
Staff Writer

When it comes to dealing with its employees, union officials say Markham is the worst municipality in Ontario.

"There's no question in my mind, labour relations in Markham are absolutely the worst in the province," said Brian Atkinson, the York Region business agent for the national office of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the union's former municipal co-ordinator for all of Ontario. "It's unbelievable."

Mr. Atkinson said his records show there is only one ongoing arbitration hearing regarding an employee grievance with the region, but there are a whopping 17 in Markham.

Markham employs approximately 350 CUPE members while the region has 1,800. Vaughan has about 450 CUPE members and has only two grievances.

Since Oct. 2001, Mr. Atkinson says another 15 grievances have gone to arbitration in Markham with 20 to 25 others being settled before they reached the hearing stage.

In comparison, York Region, which has almost six times the unionized employees, had only three and Vaughan one.

One woman was moved to a job and, when things didn't work out, she was let go on Christmas Eve.

"It's disgusting," Mr. Atkinson said. "Put it this way, there are more than 32,000 CUPE members employed by the City of Toronto and the amount of grievances in Markham is almost the same. There's no way they should be."

The town is aware there is a higher than normal level of employee grievances, Chief Administrative Officer John Lively said, noting he is concerned about the issue, especially as the town and union begin negotiating a new contract in March.

"There's no doubt the relationship with the union executive has been strained," he said, but the statement that we are the worst municipality in Ontario

is, I think, overstated. Our employees, generally, are reasonably happy."

Mr. Lively said many of the grievances filed by Markham employees never should have been because they are simple issues that somehow escalated.

However, Mr. Atkinson said the grieved issues range from bumping rights and trial employment periods to one employee who was injured at work being accused of fraud and fired without due process.

Kevin Ottawa, CUPE's town of Markham unit chairperson, said many of the problems members have stem from the town's recent core services review and the changes that initiative brought.

In an attempt to avoid duplication, cut costs and find efficiencies within the town's front line services, Mr. Lively says Markham began the review in 2001 and is still in the midst of implementing suggested changes to town departments.

Many of the changes have involved employees moving and departments amalgamating and he says the overall effect has been almost \$3 million in annual savings. But Mr. Ottawa says the overall effect has also been devastating for much of the workforce.

"Yes, there were some people moved around, but at the end of the day there were still people pushed out the door," he said. "And a lot of those people who were moved were veteran people suddenly doing jobs they weren't trained to do. One woman was moved to a job and, when things didn't work out, she was let go on Christmas Eve."

Mr. Atkinson said unlike other municipalities that have carried out the same kind of review, Markham didn't consult employees about what it wanted to do.

"It doesn't make sense. They didn't ask the front-line people how they could best deliver front-line services," he said. "And they make absolutely no effort to resolve any of these issues with their employees."

Mr. Lively says he understands the changes have been difficult for some but promises the town is trying to work with the union and employees to iron out the issues.

Deputy Mayor Frank Scarpitti said he was surprised to hear of the situation. He said he wants to set up a meeting between CUPE, council members and senior town staff.

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