

Strike could mean fewer nurses in summer

BY TERESA LATCHFORD
Staff Writer

Southlake Regional Hospital will be short nurses if the OPSEU strike results in an extended school year.

Faculty, including teachers, counsellors and librarians at 24 Ontario colleges, walked off the job earlier this week due to a contract dispute leaving 150,000 students wondering what will happen to their semester with only a month left to go.

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) is demanding improvements to its members' workload formula focusing on smaller class sizes, the hiring of more full-time faculty and a wage increase.

But if an agreement isn't reached soon, the school year could be extended into the summer, which would delay the hiring of some graduating students such as those in nursing programs. Hospitals such as Southlake won't be able to rely on fresh staff from colleges to complement those nurses graduating from university programs.

College students would not be hired until the following fall putting them at a disadvantage for the entire summer.

"We also have students who are doing placement with Southlake who can't continue until the strike is over," said Gary Ryan, vice-president of human resources at Southlake.

A placement is designed to allow college students to gain hands-on experience in their fields of study.

Usually, a certain number of hours need to be completed to gain the credit.

"We do care about what the teachers are fighting for and it will improve our education, but their timing is wrong," said Steve Mattar, president of the Seneca Student Federation.

This is a crucial time during a college student's semester and those looking forward to graduating are antsy about the thought of having the year extended because of the strike, he added.

A key program at Seneca, which matches grads with

jobs, will have to be put on hold until after the strike.

Negotiations ceased around 9:30 p.m. Monday with management proposing to allow teachers to teach as many classes as they wish, which is currently capped at six.

More classes means a greater workload and the union claims management is not listening.

The key issue for the union is not the wage increase, but the high student-to-teacher ratio, said Larry Olivo, OPSEU Local 560

representative.

"This is beginning to look like bad bargaining," he said. "It seems like they (the council) don't want to bargain at all."

Teachers are pushing for smaller class sizes so students can interact more with faculty.

For example, Mr. Olivo teaches a class of 41 paralegals students and thinks the class should be cut in half to make hands-on assignments more effective.

The union will be putting forward another proposal,

including the request for a 10-per-cent increase in faculty in the next few days offering a little more flexibility, he added, but the union will not be participating in further talks until the council is ready to address the real issues.

"We would rather be inside with our students," Mr. Olivo said. "But you gotta do what you gotta do. I think council put forward a reasonable offer."

There were no changes offered to reduce the number of working hours, but a wage increase of 12.6 per cent was

included in the contract being negotiated, which would mean a program coordinator would make \$99,303 a year and a faculty member would have a salary of \$94,277, said Rick Miner, chair of the colleges' bargaining committee. As for meeting the demand for hiring more full-time faculty, Mr. Miner said each college works on a budget and improving the quality of education might mean more teachers but it could mean investing in updated technology or facilities.

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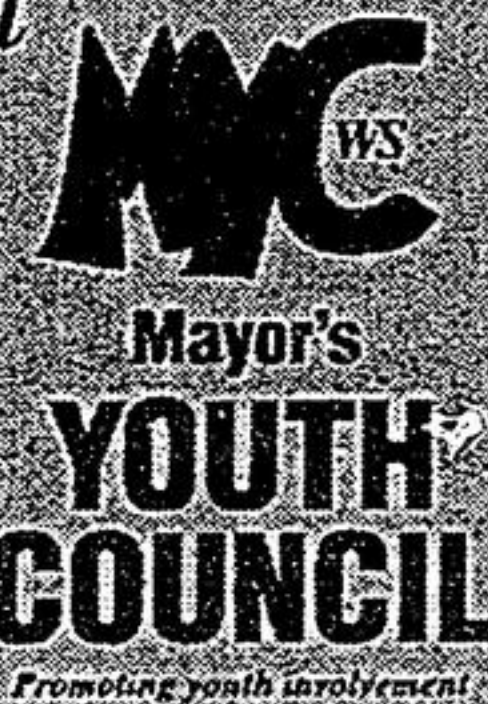
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