

Facts you should know about York transit strike

Bus strike into fourth week as riders remain stranded

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Today is the 27th day of the transit strike. If it continues, it will officially celebrate its first month Thursday and has already surpassed the two-week 2008 Viva strike as the longest the region has faced.

YORK REGION

• The region's transit system has a budget of about \$100 million. The services are contracted out to TTC, Miller Transit (southeast), Veolia (southwest and Viva, under separate contracts) and First Transit (north).

• York Region Transit was created in 2001 through the amalgamation of local transit services. At the time, it boasted about seven million riders. Before the strike, the service was on pace to set a record ridership of 21.8 million in 2011.

• Total daily ridership was more than 80,000 before the strike, across more than 120 routes. During the strike, about 60 per cent of riders cannot get on their buses. Because of the different contracts, service in the southwest (particularly Vaughan) continues to operate normally. Those workers nearly went on strike in February, but signed a new contract.

• Because taxpayers pay about 60 per cent

of every transit fare, the region actually saves \$77,000 each day drivers remain out. Operators are only paid during the hours they operate.

THE COMPANIES

• Miller Transit is a division of Markham's Miller Group, a company that now stretches across North America. If you live in York Region, you've almost certainly seen their brown vehicles picking up trash (Miller Waste) or patching up local roads (Miller Paving).

The company also owns the Bloomington Downs golf course in Richmond Hill.

• Veolia is part of a Paris-based conglomerate, Veolia Environment. The company's website notes it has operations on every continent and more than 317,034 employees working in everything from transit to waste processing and operating water plants. Transit accounts for 17 per cent of Veolia's revenues. Its shares trade on the New York and Paris stock exchanges and, according to its consolidated financial statement for 2010, the company's profit was more than \$800 million.

• First Transit is similarly a division of a larger company, the First Group, with head offices in Aberdeen, Scotland. Unlike Veolia, however, First focuses entirely on transit. It owns Greyhound and operates some school bus routes in York Region, among the four million students it transports every day.

Also similar to Veolia, the company is publicly traded. According to its latest annual report, the company's operating profit for 2010 was more than \$500 million.

THE UNIONS

The Amalgamated Transit Union represents 190,000 workers across nine provinces and 44 states.

Local 1587 represents workers for First Transit and Miller, as well as GO bus drivers who ratified a new contract. Its president is Ray Doyle.

Local 113 represents Viva drivers and gets a lot of press as the union for TTC workers. Bob Kinnear is the union's president.

While York Region is smaller than other GTA transit systems, the unions have focused on the fact drivers in neighbouring municipalities — not just Toronto, but also Brampton and Mississauga — make about \$30 an hour, while YRT workers make \$23.

Sick days and benefits have also been issues.

THE LATEST

The latest is that there is no latest.

Since walking out Oct. 24, there has only been one meeting between a union and management, when Veolia sat down with ATU 113 last Wednesday, to no avail.

• The companies say they have made good offers to which the unions have not responded.

• The unions say they want an arbitrator brought in to resolve the situation and they want the region at the table.

• The region says it may be its transit system, but the private companies are the employers, so politicians and staff have no role to play in

negotiations.

• During the 2008 strike, picketers hit prime locations, such as the Finch Station terminal. This time, they were absent until yesterday for a single rally on the steps of the regional headquarters. The goal seems to be to avoid further agitating riders while funneling their wrath toward the region, which implemented the privatized system.

• Whether or not the union has been successful in dragging the region into the fray, it's clear residents are at least as upset with absentee regional councillors as they are with the drivers who walked out. Launched in late summer to engage the local community, the region's Facebook page and Twitter feed were fairly quiet before the strike. Today, they're home to hundreds of grievances, threats of protest, online petitions and pleas to get transit moving again.

From lost jobs to long walks and difficult trips to get to school, it's clear there's an increasing frustration with the lack of progress and urgency.

• Don't expect the province to get involved, either. Local Conservative MPPs Frank Klees, Peter Shurman and Julia Munro announced last week they would ask the government to implement back-to-work legislation when Queen's Park gets back to business Monday.

But Labour Minister Linda Jeffrey has said her hope is the parties will come to a resolution on their own and despite the minority government, it's a safe bet the NDP won't join their PC counterparts on this issue.

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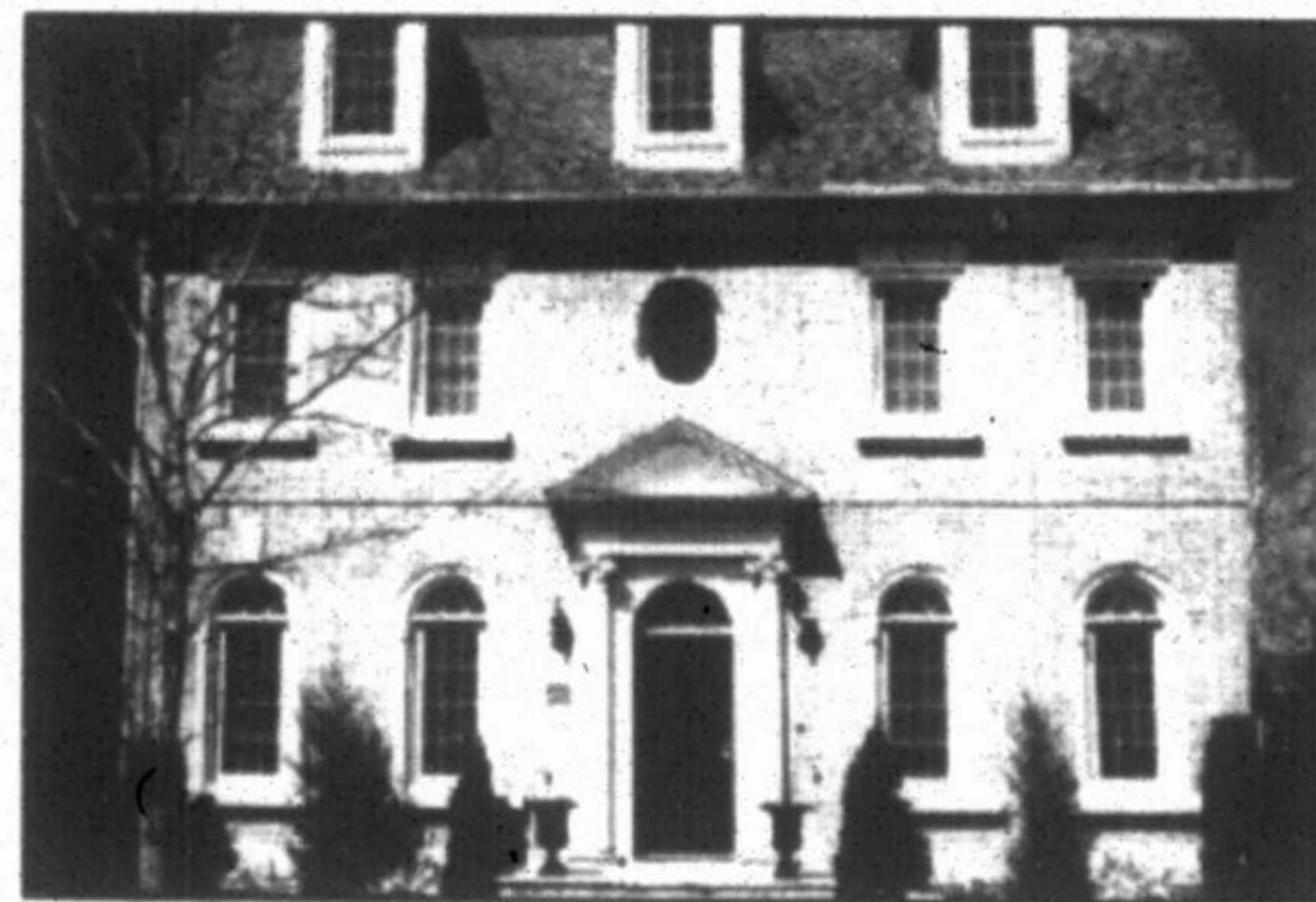
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