

Teachers picketing MPPs' offices not York Region schools

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workers against the ministry of education.

Ottawa Carleton District School Board closed their schools to students yesterday with the walkout. Hastings-Prince Edward and Lakehead schools were also targeted by the union protests Wednesday, while Niagara and Keewatin-Patrician (northwestern Ontario) were struck Tuesday and Timmins and Stratford-area schools faced walkouts Monday.

Simcoe County, which includes schools in Bradford and West Gwillimbury, is braced for the strike tomorrow. Parents there have been informed schools will be closed to students.

"We are not expecting any parents to arrive with their students for a regular school day. Should those situations occur, we will deal with each situation on an individual basis and speak with the parents about the fact that there is no teacher supervision at the school and their need to make alternate care arrangements for their child," said board spokesperson Marla Tomlinson.

Members of the York branch of Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) received their picket signs and assignments Monday. Unlike other regions that saw teachers picketing outside local schools, York members were assigned to one of seven local MPP constituency offices or the school board headquarters in Aurora.

MPPs will be targeted because they were responsible for the passage of the bill and need to be held accountable for Thursday's strike, York ETFO president David Clegg said. The Liberals' actions and loss of teachers' goodwill will be a legacy lasting much longer than today's walkout, he said.

Some of those MPPs said they would be at their offices today and prepared to speak with union members.

Julia Munro said that she would be at her constituency office in Holland Landing at some point during the day and would invite inside two representatives of the group, if they wished to speak with her.

The York-Simcoe Tory MPP said the Liberals recalled legislature in August because they said it was necessary to pass Bill 115 to pre-

vent disruption to the school year, something that did not happen.

"It seems that isn't important anymore to this government ... teachers want badly to teach. They didn't sign up for this kind of tension and it's totally unfair to parents."

In Markham, Liberal MPP Helena Jaczek was also open to inviting union members into her office.

JACZEK OPEN

It's an "extraordinary situation" she said, because during meetings last February, the union said members wanted a two-per-cent increase. When they were told that wasn't in the cards, "they basically walked away".

Parents she has spoken with in her riding have no sympathy towards elementary teachers, she said.

"They understand that with the deficit position we're in, it's only reasonable, given the increases teachers have had over the last 10 years, to take a pause."

Vaughan MPP Steven Del Duca said he respected the teachers' right to have their voices heard outside his offices in a Woodbridge plaza.

"I know they will be respectful of the patrons in the plaza. I expect it will be a peaceful protest and they will make their point, but a day after the walkout, the reality will be the same ... Ultimately, the numbers are what they are" and the provincial deficit remains.

After the walkout, he said, he hoped the teachers would come back to the table for a real resolution."

Thornhill PC MPP Peter Shurman, who won't be at his constituency office as he's away with family for the holidays, said he understands the teachers' frustration with Premier Dalton McGuinty.

"I don't blame them. My party supported Bill 115 on the basis that it would ensure (an) uninterrupted school year and to rein in spending. We would have preferred all public sector workers have the freeze because that is fair."

Liberal MPP Reza Moridi said he would be available to speak with union members outside his Richmond Hill constituency office and planned to tell them that it's not possible to maintain full-day kindergarten, not fire teachers while still reining in expenses to deal with the deficit.

"Where are we going to get the money from?" he said, adding the alternatives would be to raise taxes or borrow money, putting future generations into further debt.

As parents scrambled to fill the voids left by the teachers' job actions, local businesses were feeling the fallout.

Aurora's Victoria Sopik said her business, Kids & Company, is mandated to provide emergency care to any parents registered through their companies' benefits plan.

They had extra staff and locations at the ready and expected most York Region children requiring emergency care to be cared for at the Aurora location today.

Bonnie Craig, director at Ovation Performing Arts Academy, said her Richmond Hill company has received a slew of calls since teachers began withholding extra-curriculars from parents thinking the rest of the year's activities are a washout.

She said she has heard "rampant" pessimism over the prospect of this issue being resolved before the end of the school year.

"They are frustrated and upset that their kids are caught in the middle of this."

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