

'Morale low', York police working-to-rule

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The police union in York Region officially began 'work to rule' job action Monday morning, after members voted to begin voicing their displeasure with the York Regional Police's executive command unit.

Although officers are forbidden from striking or picketing by the Police Services Act, there are still a number of actions that can be taken, including speaking to the community about concerns and wearing pins, T-shirts and hats saying: "Supporting our Community" to volunteer and personal events.

Beyond that, officers may choose to start taking their two mandated 45-minute breaks during a shift rather than skipping them, union president Todd Sepkowski said.

A police source said officers would also be using their discretion when writing tickets and may choose to issue warnings instead.

The decision comes at an already heated time, months after contract negotiations were put on hold after the union asked for mediation.

A lot of the issues come down to the punitive oversight officers put up with on a daily basis, York Regional Police Association secre-

tary Phil Shrewsbury-Gee said.

"Morale is the lowest I've ever seen in my 30 years," he said. "Discipline and the management of discipline used to be educational and corrective, that's now gone to punitive."

Shrewsbury-Gee said, specifically, the more than 1,500 serving members find it unreasonable they are being fined hundreds of dollars for running red lights while performing their duties.

In numerous instances, officers have been fined 2-1/2 times the standard fee for motorists who run red lights, which is about \$165.

An officer in Richmond Hill was docked eight hours pay, about \$350, after running a red light even though he witnessed the suspect he was chasing run the same light.

Only months ago, an officer was docked pay after chasing a break-and-enter suspect and running a red in Markham.

"That sort of discipline doesn't reflect in the private sector," he said. "It's making it more difficult for guys to serve the public. It's an accumulation of issues that has come to a head over time and guys are no longer accepting it and saying something has to be done about it."

The service, meanwhile, insists

this policy is to ensure the safety of the public.

Another issue is what the union calls the force's "ticket quota", in which officers are told they need to hit targets, including: two traffic stops per shift and three liquor licence tickets per year.

Meanwhile, a platoon of about 30 officers is supposed to hand out 260 traffic tickets per month.

'They're not being given the respect they deserve.'

The service said these are "goals" set out by the community, who consistently raise the issue with police.

Furthermore, Sepkowski said his officers must also interact with a number of provincial oversight organizations, including the Special Investigations Unit and the Office of Independent Police Review.

"One guy said to me the other day, 'We used to come to work to do our job, now we're just wanting to find ways not to get in trouble,'" he said. "Our members don't want to get to a place where they don't want to do their jobs."

The job action comes months after the sunshine list was released

in Ontario showing that York Regional Police officers have 70 per cent of its officers now making more than \$100,000.

In its wake, Markham Mayor and York Regional Police Services Board chairperson Frank Scarpitti was quoted as calling into question whether the cost of emergency services is sustainable in York Region.

"Arbitrated salary and benefit awards in policing have exceeded the rate of inflation, the cost of living and the salary adjustments negotiated or provided to other unionized and non-unionized staff in our communities," he said. "This is not sustainable. These cost increases cannot continue at their current rate without jeopardizing other essential services and infrastructure needs."

He went on to say the police arbitration system is a "broken" one.

This prompted a biting response from Sepkowski, in which he chastised Scarpitti for making the comments while negotiations are underway.

"In consideration of the fact that the association is currently participating with the Police Services Board in the process of collective bargaining, it is most disappointing to see Scarpitti making comments concerning our contract specific-

ly, and the process generally within the media," he said. "The YRPA has always bargained in good faith, and we will continue to do so."

"They're not being given the respect they deserve," said Shrewsbury-Gee of Scarpitti's comments. "And these kinds of comments feed into the belief that they don't care, these words re-inforce that belief."

Shrewsbury-Gee said that the decision on some sort of work to rule was taken last Wednesday during a "very-well attended" meeting during which one member put forward a motion and it was unanimously voted in favour of.

In reply to the job action, Scarpitti said the board has not been formally notified of any action.

"The Board has the complete confidence that York Regional Police employees will continue to perform their duties at the high level we are accustomed to," Scarpitti stated in a comment on the board's website. "We feel the most recent offer for wage increases was very fair and in line with increases recently negotiated with other police services. The board also has the significant responsibility to be fiscally responsible to all our taxpayers. The board is confident an agreement can be reached."

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