

High school teachers in Peel ready to strike ? Could start May 4

The teacher and occasional teacher bargaining units of District 19 (Peel) of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) have announced legal strike action can begin May 4.

That is assuming a local collective agreement is not reached with the Peel District School Board.

Our collective agreements expired in August of 2014, and since that time our members have shown a great deal of patience despite the slow pace of bargaining, District 19 President Mike Bettiol said. Their work, both in and outside of the classroom, becomes more demanding all the time, but the employer has refused to address their concerns in any meaningful way at the bargaining table. The school board's approach to bargaining will have to change dramatically if they want to avoid a full withdrawal of services. Board officials are taking a different view.

Letters were sent to parents earlier this week to communicate that, in the event of a strike, all secondary schools will be closed. The Peel board has about 42,000 secondary students in 36 secondary schools.

It is very disappointing that OSSTF provincial has tried so hard to make it seem like this is about local issues, Board Chair Janet McDougald commented. That is deliberately misleading to our parents, students and staff. The fact is, all major monetary items have to be resolved at the provincial table. This is all about putting pressure on the provincial negotiations.

Our goal remains to negotiate a fair and reasonable agreement with the Board, but our members are becoming increasingly frustrated, Sue Doughty-Smith, chair of the District 19 negotiating teams, said. They have given their bargaining teams an overwhelming mandate with the strike votes taken in the fall, and they have made their concerns very clear. The Board's complacency and indifference to our interest in renewing our collective agreements has done nothing but exacerbate those concerns.

As a board, we are 100 per cent committed to fair negotiations with our unions and federations including OSSTF, McDougald said. Locally, negotiations were progressing well. We have met six times locally and have more dates set. We are optimistic about local negotiations and willing to work hard to reach a mutually agreeable, negotiated local settlement. No local action was needed to keep us at the table we are there and want a settlement.

The reality is that this is a provincial strategy with a harshly negative local impact for our students, she added. Our students are being used by OSSTF provincial as pawns in their strategy. That is not fair. That is not right.

Our members' patience is now wearing thin, Doughty-Smith said. We continue, however, to hope that the employer responds in a constructive way, and we remain ready to negotiate at any time in an effort to prevent disruption.

Our Peel secondary teachers are dedicated, caring professionals, committed to student success, McDougald said. We know they do not want to jeopardize the school year for our secondary students especially our graduating students. But this is local action guided by OSSTF at the provincial level. That is unacceptable for us and for the other six boards chosen by OSSTF provincial for potential local action that is really a provincial strategy.