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SETTLEMENTS REACHED ELSEWHERE. WHY NOT HERE?

I guess after thirteen weeks of a labour dispute happening right in front of us, we're legitimately allowed to ask "What's going on here?"

What makes that an even more important question is the fact that agreements have been reached between six other jurisdictions in the province that were involved in similar work stoppages involving locals of OPSEU, or *Ontario Public Service Employees Union*. But the OPSEU main website still lists Local 472 as being on strike, whereas other locals have reached agreements with their employer agencies.

So what might be the holdup here?

The two sides have been trading accusations as to who was unwilling to come to the table, both of them pointing the finger of blame at the other. But over much time, a situation has been reached where both sides are committing to open or resume talks. And after squabbling over the dates and the identity of the mediator, the sides eventually agreed to meet, something I believe has happened at least once already, perhaps late last week.

If that did happen, I have no idea what was discussed or what resolutions were made towards the continuation of negotiations, if any.

No question, returning to the bargaining table is a good sign, especially after thirteen weeks of what was essentially wheel-spinning. But the resumption of talks is not a harbinger of a soon-to-be completed deal of any sort. It's merely the opening of a new stage in the conflict.

That said, onlookers might want to ask how six other union locals could hammer out deals with their respective agencies while things continue to drag on here in Renfrew. All of these agencies are arm's-length extensions of the provincial government and are all funded by that same government. And all of the workers in those other jurisdictions are card-carrying members of OPSEU. So all things being equal, it's easy to wonder how the people in those jurisdictions managed to come to a settlement whereas the people in Renfrew/Arnprior can't.

What's so different about us? What's so different about Renfrew's situation?

Is it too naive to suggest that personality may be part of the problem? Especially if one of those personalities is the lead negotiator for one of the sides? The same personality I've heard described consistently as being the "problem" right from the get-go? As being the problem long before the strike got started in the first place?

OPSEU, on its website, reports that:

- Community Living Trent Highlands settled through mediation-arbitration.

- Lynwood Charlton Centre settled.
- Community Living Prince Edward settled.
- Community Living London settled.
- Murray McKinnon Foundation settled.
- Community Living Thunder Bay settled.

Of great interest to me, aside from this list of settlements, is the indication that at least one of them, Trent Highlands, settled after a combination process involving mediation followed by arbitration. If you have confidence in your arguments, then you're likely to have increased confidence in going to arbitration if all else fails. It's only people who know they have a losing hand that want nothing to do with an arbitrator, as a loss in arbitration isn't a compromise, it's a loss.

It appears the management over in Trent Highlands had the necessary confidence to allow for arbitration. What about the management here at CLRCS?

That is potentially important because this dispute appears to involve a lot of areas of disagreement other than wages, although wages are still a big part of it.

In addition to regular wage increases, the two parties disagree on a fundamental issue, that being the impact of Bill 124 on wages and the union's demand for retroactive pay in the face of the Supreme Court decision striking down that legislation. The employees claim they're owed this money. Management says they already got it. And a document proffered by management purports to cover discussions around that Bill 124 remedy that had, as they claim, already been agreed to. A document with signatures from both sides. A document that has created more confusion than it has certainty around this issue.

Other issues are in play as well. Scheduling, seniority, working conditions, staffing, job classifications, and of course, the abysmal nature of provincial funding and the need for both parties to lobby government to change that moving forward.

Trying to solve all of this at the same time, and during the same round of talks, is an unreasonable goal, especially iff you have contentious participants at the bargaining table. This is the very thing that could have been avoided had the agency agreed to the *mass-mediation* model, where issues are divided up and discussed at separate "tables," but CLRCS chose not to buy in to that model, especially since there was an arbitration component to it for any issues that couldn't be agreed upon.

Instead, the parties decided a game of musical chairs with potential mediators was the way to go, and a further game of peek-a-boo was played whereby nobody could talk because the other party was "unavailable."

As I said, it's just recently both parties agreed to show up at the same time and at the same place, something I believe they may have done once to date.

All that said, considering the number of issues, and the disagreements about what the issues actually are, it's not hard to see the conditions for an impasse continuing. As I mentioned before, showing up at the bargaining table isn't exactly a statement that you're willing to bargain in good faith. It's more an exercise in public relations after a strike that's entered its fourth month already.

The agreements in other jurisdictions indicate that dispute resolution is possible. Instead of being just one OPSEU local among many carrying on their "*Worth Fighting For*" campaign, Local 472 has now become one of the increasingly smaller number of locals province-wide who have not settled with their employer agencies. Instead of being one among many, Renfrew and area has now become one of the few outliers.

If it means anything at all, at least sitting down to talk means we can hopefully transition from a war of public relations to a new stage featuring legitimate and good-faith negotiations.

So I guess that's something.