

WoodGreen Community Services staff hit the picket line ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

For the first time ever, Workers United Canada (WUC) - Local 154, which represents more than 500 workers at WoodGreen (WG) Community Services, has gone on strike.

Despite 11th hour negotiations, workers voted overwhelmingly Wednesday, Oct. 8 in favour of strike action.

Union reps notified WoodGreen of the outcome of a third strike vote at 9:15 p.m.

At 6:30 a.m. on the morning of Oct. 9, two large groups of striking workers started picketing outside two of WoodGreen's seven child care centres: Morse Street at Queen Street East and Carlaw Avenue in Leslieville and the Debbie Yeung at Cosburn and Donlands avenues in East York.

Those 150 or so workers along with a second wave of union members gathered at WoodGreen Community Services' main building at 815 Danforth Ave. at Jones Avenue at 11:30 a.m. Thursday for a rally.

Workers donned bright orange Workers United Canada T-shirts, blew whistles, and carried signs with slogans like "1.25% won't pay the rent", "WoodGreen workers deserve a fair contract", and "Respect all frontline workers. We make WoodGreen work!" as they chanted songs calling for fair wages and a return to the bargaining table.

Union steward Allyson Cullen, a registered early childhood educator, has worked at the east-end social services agency for 13 years.

"We're here for all WoodGreen employees, all WoodGreen members. ...We're here for fair pay for all WoodGreen employees," she said from the Thursday morning picket line.

"Management hasn't been treating us all fairly," she alleged. "The respect that we haven't been getting has just been heartbreaking."

Social worker David Anderson, president of WUC - Local 154, said his side has been trying unsuccessfully for six months to reach a new collective agreement with WG management.

"WoodGreen over the years has moved towards a more corporate model of governance," he charged, pointing to the agency's hiring of several new vice-presidents in recent years. "The frontline workers have had less than cost of living increases in the last three years."

"So far, there hasn't really been a give and take. It's been take this and leave," Anderson continued, noting it took so long for the union to go on strike because they wanted to ensure they're making the right decision.

"People feel incredibly disrespected."

WoodGreen's president and CEO Brian Smith said the east-end social service agency is "disappointed" contract negotiations broke down to the point workers went on strike.

"Generally, we've been able to sit down at the table and hammer out an agreement. It wasn't there this time, unfortunately," he said Tuesday morning, adding WoodGreen has been working on developing contingency plans in the event workers walked off the job.

"We're obviously concerned about making sure all of our clients' - especially the vulnerable ones (seniors and families with young children) - needs are met," Smith said.

The contingency plan includes closing its Leslieville childcare centre within Leslieville Public School at 254 Leslie St. as well as some of the agency's employment centres.

"All parents have been given the option to take their kids to another WoodGreen centre, if they're stuck," he said.

Smith said the topic of wages as well as benefits for part-timers have been key issues during negotiations.

He said their offer of a 1.25 per cent wage increase in 2014 and 2015 is as much as WG can manage with its limited funding.

"That offer is better than five of six other agencies we examined," Smith said, adding in some cases workers at other agencies received zero wage increases. "Our staff (members) are important and we want to be able to pay them as much as we can without having to reduce services."

He went on to say that the contract they presented to workers saw no reduction in benefits and even some improvements as well as 18 sick days, three cultural/heritage day + vacation time.

WoodGreen Community Services is one of the largest community-based agencies in Toronto with 32 locations in the city's east end city employing childcare staff, personal support workers, ESL instructors, housing and settlement workers, and employment counsellors, to name a few.

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