

MEMBER STATEMENT—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

BINDING ARBITRATION OF GNWT-UNW LABOUR DISPUTE

February 6, 2019

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to talk about the negotiations between the Government of the Northwest Territories and its unionized workforce represented by the Union of Northern Workers. The union is in a legal strike position. Rather than wait for the results of mediation scheduled for this weekend, they served a strike notice yesterday for next Monday. This is a deliberately provocative move that increases the stakes for this weekend.

At the end of the day yesterday the government responded with a provocative move of its own. The deputy minister of Finance noted that strike notice had been served and essential and emergency services are in place. He then went on to lay out the process for union members to work during a strike. The result has been the same as throwing gas on a smouldering fire.

Mr. Speaker, Yellowknife has its own painful experience of having workers cross a picket line. The temperature of the Giant Mine strike rose as people returned to work or accepted jobs as replacement workers. People said and did things that ruptured relationships permanently, but worse, much worse, nine people died in what many believe is cause and effect.

Constituents have been in touch with me to suggest that the government's tacit encouragement to cross the picket line is the wrong move. I agree. It will turn up the temperature in this dispute and create a toxic environment, not just in the workplace, but throughout the community. I don't want to see this happen in Yellowknife Centre or anywhere else.

I believe there is a way out that allows both the UNW and the GNWT to call this dispute a draw, and that is to agree to enter into binding arbitration in the event that this weekend's mediation fails. There is no point in keeping arbitration as an option once the strike has begun. The damage will have been done. My constituents have been clear. They do not want a strike. They believe it will harm their businesses, damage our economy, and prompt some of them to leave the Northwest Territories for good.

Mr. Speaker, this worst-case scenario is avoidable. The union has said it will agree to binding arbitration. I want the same commitment from the government. I will have questions for the Minister of Finance, and I will not accept answers that he cannot talk about negotiations. What I want is a proven alternative to move forward. Mahsi.