

MLAs reject proposal for arbitration as strike looms

Binding arbitration motion fails 11 to six with one abstention

by Avery Zingel
Northern News Services
Somba K'e/Yellowknife

MLAs rejected a motion to seek binding arbitration ahead of a looming strike.

They voted down the motion 11 to six, with one abstention.

Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green tabled the motion, which would have allowed a mediator to impose a final agreement between the government and its workers.

"There are no guarantees that either side will get what they want but (binding arbitration) is preferable to a strike," said Green.

On Feb. 5, the Union of Northern Workers (UNW) said about 4,000 territorial government workers and employees of the NWT Power Corporation would strike at noon today if negotiators failed to hammer out a new collective agreement.

The UNW and the government held mediation talks over the weekend.

MLAs Daniel McNeely, Cory Vanthuyne, Michael Nadli, Herb Nakimayak and cabinet, which voted as a bloc, were against the motion.

MLAs RJ Simpson, Frederick (Sonny) Blake Jr., Kieron Testart, Shane Thompson, Kevin O'Reilly

and Julie Green voted in favour of the motion.

Tu Nedhe-Wiilideh MLA Tom Beaulieu abstained, signalling his reluctance to support the motion or vote against it in an impassioned speech to his colleagues.

"I'm in a quandary," he said.

Following the vote, Green voiced her disappointment with the results and called it an inability to "show political leadership on this issue."

Finance Minister Robert C. McLeod said that voting against the motion did not indicate support for the strike.

"I have a lot of confidence in the ability of our negotiators and UNW negotiators," he said. "I believe we would be able to come to an agreement."

Green: arbitration 'preferable to a strike'

As a member of the CBC's union for 16 years, Green saw strikes on "what felt like a regular schedule."

"I remember a riot ... where there was a brawl and police outside on horseback," she said. "It was ugly."

In the history of the territory, "Labour action polarized the community," she said. "People threw punches, ended friendships and

moved away. Widows and mothers talked about their lost husbands and sons."

After the violence at Giant Mine in 1992, workers "didn't recognize themselves as those angry volatile people," she said.

"Strikes can be dangerous because stakes are high, tempers flare," she said. "Confrontation on the picket line is not just likely, it is inevitable."

In the fall labour, negotiations ended after veteran mediator Vince Ready determined both parties were too far apart to come to an agreement.

They agreed to meet again on Feb. 8 and 9.

Vanthuyne was a member of the Con Mine union during the Giant Mine strike, he said.

"I do not need to be reminded of the impacts of a strike," he said. "I lived it."

The unionized employees have been without an agreement since 2016.

Testart troubled by document urging workers to cross the picket line

Tensions rose earlier this week as unionists confronted Premier Bob McLeod during his constitu-



"I'm really disappointed my colleagues were unable to show political leadership on this issue," said MLA Julie Green after her associates voted against binding arbitration.

ency meeting about a document that explained how unionized workers could cross the picket line and resume work if a strike occurs.

In response to that document, the UNW said it had increased strike pay from \$117 per day to 60 per cent of a

striking worker's income, in a news release issued Feb. 8.

Testart presented binding arbitration as the only course of action to avert a looming strike.

"There will be anger, division, costs to local business," he said.

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Photo above courtesy of Pierre-Emmanuel Chailion

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