

Outside groups fear school strike

BY LOUISE BROWN
EDUCATION REPORTER

Thousands of Boy Scouts, Brownies and community athletes across the city will be locked out of schools next week if support workers for the Toronto District School Board go on strike.

If so, it will be the latest body blow to the thousands of neighbourhood groups already reeling from steep new user fees slapped on them by the school board last fall.

"We're dead in the water if there's a strike — and so are all the sports and religious groups who use schools after hours," said Roger Wallace of the Toronto Badminton Association, which has 60 clubs with 2,000 members who play in Toronto school gyms twice a week.

"It's one last rotten thing for kids this year, especially the students who turned to community teams because their school sports programs have been cancelled."

Support staff, from caretakers and secretaries to education assistants, are threatening to strike starting midnight tomorrow to push for a new contract.

And while the board will try to keep schools open during the day, the loss of caretakers to stay late to clean and lock up would cancel evening and weekend permits for the thousands of after-hours groups that use schools for everything from aerobics to art classes.

Boy Scouts of Canada, which has more than 5,000 Beavers, Cubs and Scouts who meet each week in Toronto public schools, has sent a notice urging leaders not to cancel their meetings next week in the event of a strike, but rather to line up a field trip or meet in a park.

And for volleyball players across the city, the threat of disruption could not come at a worse time, as provincial championships begin Saturday at schools across the city.

"A strike will have a major impact on teams' ability to practice, and we've had to line up backup locations outside the city for the games themselves," said Diane Wood, executive director of the Ontario Volleyball Association.

A strike by support workers seems likely after talks this week failed to raise hopes of a settlement between the board and the Canadian Union of Public Employees, Local 4400, which represents 13,000 support workers, including lunchroom supervisors, heritage and English-as-a-second-language instructors, music instructors and bus drivers.

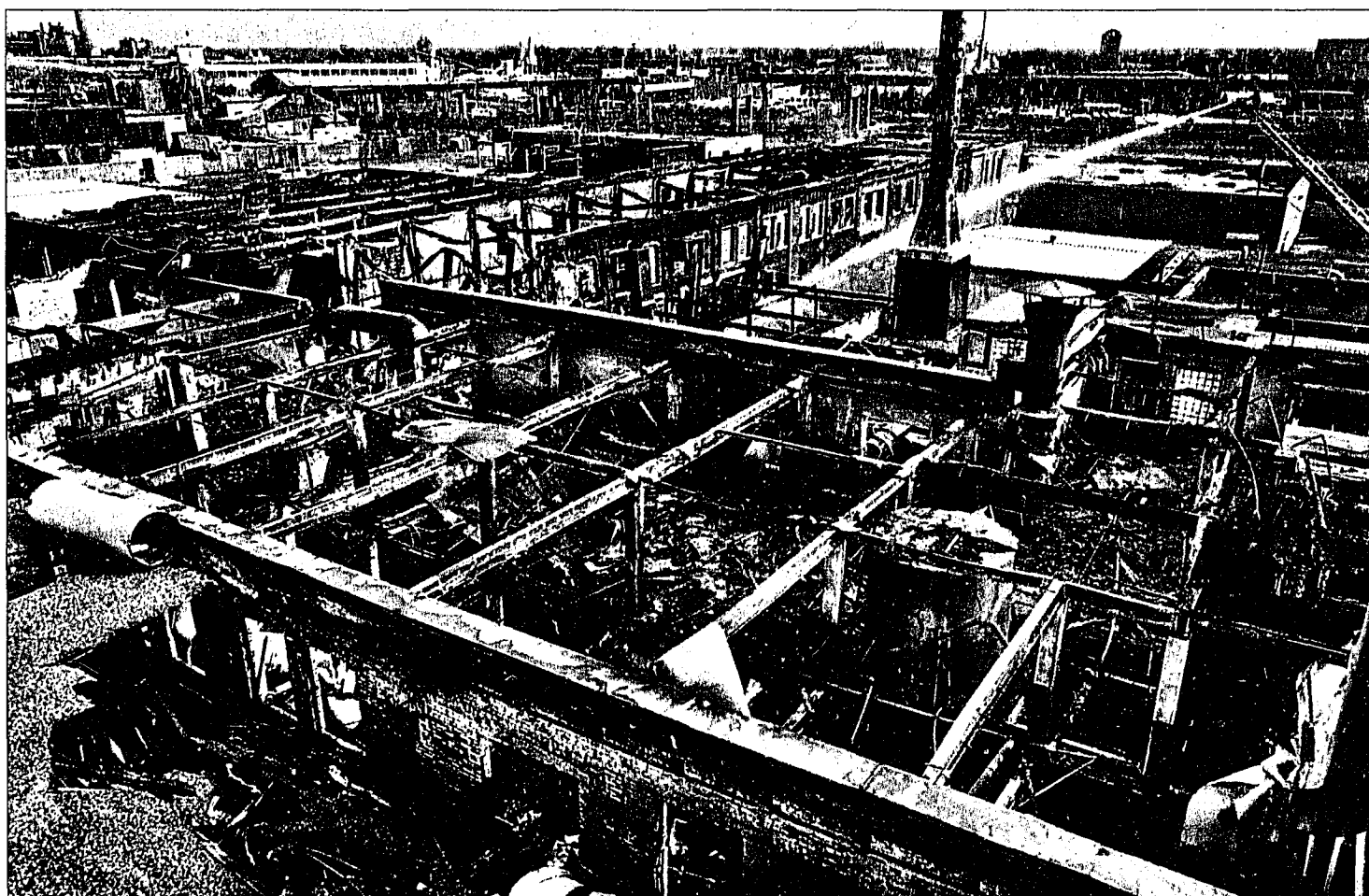
Trustees emerged from a private session last night and announced they'd decided to give negotiators "additional flexibility."

Sources told The Star that the board is increasing its wage offer beyond the average 2.4 per cent increase workers will receive as wages are harmonized across the new board. Specific numbers were not discussed, the source says.

If CUPE does not accept a deal by Friday night's strike deadline, the board has decided they will request the help of mediator, "because we are not prepared to give up," said board vice-chair Donna Cansfield.

Support workers are seeking an 8 per cent raise over two years, following a similar raise won by high school and elementary teachers in the city.

With files from Kristin Rushowy



MIKE HAGARTY PHOTO

AFTERMATH: Firefighters were still dousing hot spots yesterday following Tuesday's fire at the A. R. Clarke & Co. tannery building.

Fire bylaw broken, official says

Crew shouldn't be working in building with sprinklers off

BY ANDREW CHUNG
STAFF REPORTER

A fire statute was broken at a vacant tannery destroyed by fire Tuesday when a crew worked inside the building though the sprinklers had been shut down, said a deputy fire chief.

Police and fire services say workers dismantling equipment and pipes inside probably sparked the blaze while using acetylene torches. The Ontario Fire Marshal's office is also investigating.

The Eastern Ave. tannery, A.R. Clarke & Co., was put into receivership last year after its American parent filed for bankruptcy protection.

The sprinkler system was drained

last fall. It's not unusual for owners of vacant buildings to do that, said Deputy Chief Terry Boyko, because if the building isn't heated, the pipes could freeze.

"But nobody should have been working in that building with that provision in place," Boyko said.

A building must have 24-hour security and be secured if sprinklers are turned off according to city law, said the deputy chief, who is responsible for fire prevention in the department.

"Obviously, something wrong was done here," Boyko said. "There should not have been people inside that building doing work, especially hot work" such as using torches.

Boyko said he's had no discussions about blame but would not rule out possible charges.

The issue has made the charred mess left behind even more tangled.

Alan Spergel, president of the building's receiver, Spergel and Associates,

said he wasn't aware of the rule. The building was being heated, he said, but having walls recently removed meant the sprinkler system had to be drained.

He said the American liquidator in charge of dismantling the equipment for resale made that decision, Spergel said.

His firm was in the process of selling the property and buildings to Toronto Film Studios — the tannery's neighbour — which planned to renovate the factory for office and movie set space.

Yesterday, studio president Ken Ferguson expressed surprise at the broken rules. "I'm glad it wasn't my direction to send someone in there," he said.

Ferguson said the fire has changed his business plans. "If the receiver wants to leave us with a mess, we're not prepared to pay as much."

The film studio agreed to buy the 4-

hectare property for less than the \$3.5 million asking price while picking up a multi-million-dollar environmental cleanup bill and \$500,000 in property tax arrears.

The receiver would get any money from the American insurer since building titles are not transferred yet, said Spergel, adding that getting insurance for the property was "difficult."

Hydro was to be restored to all neighbouring homes by last night.

The tannery has been condemned by city inspectors, fire investigators say.

Yesterday, the northern wall of the structure was knocked down.

At the same time, an insurance company is hiring a private engineer to determine if any of the building can be salvaged, Ayotte said.

Fire officials expected Eastern Ave., between Larchmount and Winnifred Aves., to remain closed today.

Targeted teacher quit job

Continued from B1

to create some friction" before he arrived.

"One of the teachers took the photo (from the paper), photocopied it ... and did a mailing list to parents, teachers and students to raise awareness that there was somebody coming to the school that was gay," Villeneuve said.

Korjus, who retired as a teacher at Westwood in the summer of 1999 and worked as a supply teacher there from Sept. 10 to Oct. 25, 1999, also said he phoned parents to discourage them from participating in the school board's investigation about the disparaging remarks.

Korjus, who taught at Westwood for 14 years out of his 31-year teaching career, said he regretted gossiping about the photos and participating in conduct that might have harmed Villeneuve.

He admitted he failed to maintain the standards of his profession.

Villeneuve had been teaching seven years when he joined Westwood in September, 1999. He left the profession on Oct. 27 because of what he called a "hostile environment."

He complained to the school's principal on Sept. 22, 1999, and was told to talk to Korjus, which he did more than a week later after he heard photos were circulated and he found out students were mocking him.

On Oct. 27, Korjus was told by the principal he was not welcome as a supply teacher at Westwood until the matter was resolved.



KORJUS

The circumstances have caused Villeneuve "great emotional upset" and had "a detrimental effect" on the entire school community, the statement of facts read.

Villeneuve complained to the Ontario College of Teachers about five individuals. The other four complaints will not result in hearings, said Denys Giguère, spokesperson for college.

Korjus' lawyer, Michael Wright, said his client is "very happy the matter has been resolved. ... He's particularly pleased we were able to reach a resolution which meant that no teachers and no students were required to appear."

With files from Robert Faulkner

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Death probed of man charged in slayings

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well enough to be visited by homicide officers, who told him he was under arrest on two charges of second-degree murder.

Police planned to bring in a justice of the peace yesterday to remand Harmon into the custody of the Whitby jail. This would have meant jail staff could have taken guard duty in the hospital.

The double slaying was uncovered Monday after Marcia Harmon's mother became concerned when her daughter did not drop Danielle off before school as she usually did. She dialed 911 after she found both of the Harmon's cars at the home and the doors locked at around 8:30 a.m.

The slayings shocked the Pickering community in the

Finch Ave and Dixie Rd. area. Neighbours and friends called the Harmons a "normal suburban family" and said Danielle was a "happy little girl in pigtails."

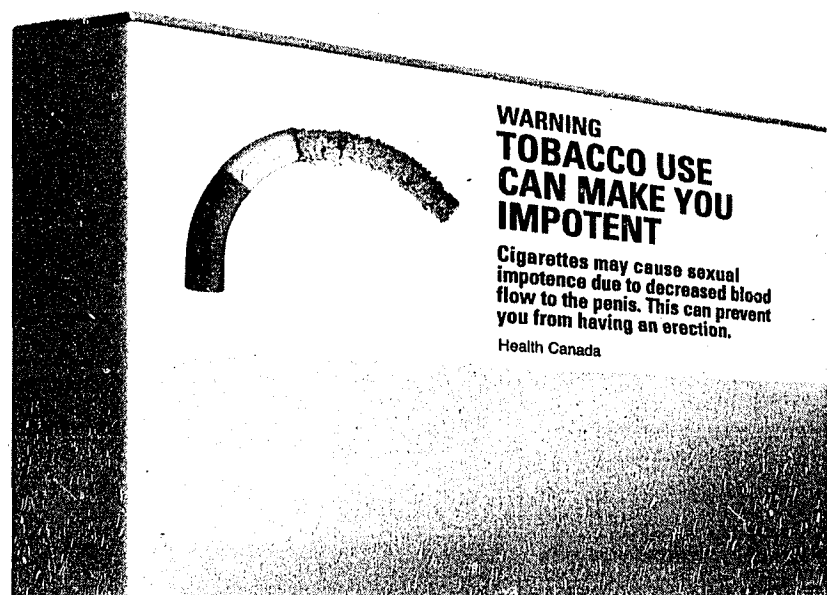
"This is a very sad story. We have lost an excellent nurse," said Pranjit Sidhu, a nurse at North York General Hospital and a friend of Marcia Harmon.

"She was always so happy, always talking about her little daughter," Sidhu said.

The funeral for Marcia and Danielle Harmon and will be held April 6 at 10 a.m. at Caruthers Creek Church on Bayley St., west of Lakeridge Rd. in Ajax. Visitation will be next Wednesday and Thursday from 7 to 9 p.m. at McEachnie Funeral Home at 28 Old Kingston Rd.

With files from Dale Anne Freed

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