

Paramedics stripped of right to walk off the job

Kim Guttormson and Renata D'Aliesio

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The province has declared EMS an essential service, removing the ability of paramedics and EMTs to go on strike.

A year before the Calgary paramedics' contract expires -- and months after they were willing to walk off the job to bolster their fight for better pay -- they will no longer have strike action in their arsenal.

Rick Fraser, the new president of the Calgary paramedics union, said they believe they have the right to collective bargaining.

"Most negotiations are settled without resorting to job action. Some of the recent difficulties around collective agreements typically are the direct result of not enough funding," he said. "Our issue is not the ability to strike, it's the ability to be heard."

Last summer, paramedics, EMTs and support staff were prepared to walk off the job before the province stepped in and imposed arbitration. The city had offered 12 per cent over three years, while the union was looking for 18 per cent over the same period and a one-time wage adjustment. The arbitrator agreed with the city.

On Thursday, Health Minister Ron Leipter announced the essential service designation, which already applies to police and firefighters, while revealing the province will take over responsibility for EMS from municipalities.

He said EMS staff should not be allowed to strike now that they are being brought under the provincial umbrella, viewing emergency medical employees in the same light as doctors and nurses.

EMS Chief Tom Sampson said they have always lobbied for the essential service designation.

"We believe EMS has one foot in health care and one foot in public safety. As such, we should be an essential service," he said. "We think that creates an assurance for the public regarding service provision and at the same time provides methodology to ensure they get appropriate settlements."

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart said the ability for paramedics to strike had always worried her.

"We're always vulnerable during labour negotiations," she said. "Now that will change."

"It is an essential service. This is good for Calgarians."

The provincial opposition parties criticized the government for making the decision.

NDP leader Brian Mason suggested the essential service designation might be a vindictive measure following the union-backed Albertans For Change advertising campaign during the provincial election.

"This is unnecessary and quite frankly strikes me as a slap at working people in this province," he said.

Liberal MLA Bridget Pastoor agreed, saying, "I see more and more things in the province being eroded in terms of fair bargaining practices."

kguttormson@theherald.canwest.com

rd'aliesio@theherald.canwest.com

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