

Peoria city workers launch wildcat strike

By SCOTT WILLIAMS
of the Journal Star

The day-to-day workings of city government in Peoria were slowed considerably today as city workers launched a wildcat strike to protest a labor contract forced on them Tuesday by the Peoria City Council.

Dozens of members of the city's largest labor union took the day off work in protest, citing an "illness" now believed to be part of an organized and long-term campaign by the municipal work force.

The City of Peoria Municipal Employees Association (COPMEA) is withholding its option to call an official strike of City Hall, but the union apparently has encouraged a spread of the disabling condition known as "spontaneous councilitis."

City officials estimate that at least 55 union members called in sick today and caused slowdowns in several city departments, including code enforcement, engineering, inspections, animal control and police.

"It's not business as usual, but we're still in business," City Manager James Daken said.

Hardest hit by the union action was the Peoria Animal Shelter, where all seven COPMEA members called in sick and nearly closed down the shelter.

An informed union source confirmed Tuesday that the wildcat strike — called a "sick-out" by city officials — grew in popularity by word of mouth after the union's 187 members learned of the city's forced contract intentions.

"If someone takes a contract and sticks it up a part of your anatomy, that hurts and you don't feel like you can work the next day," the union source said.

COPMEA President Richard L. Johnston told reporters Tuesday that his union would not consider any organized action against the city until its next membership meeting, scheduled for Oct. 15.

And before the city council voted on the forced contract Tuesday, Mayor Jim Maloof

appealed to an estimated 50 city workers who first picketed outside City Hall and then filled the council chambers.

"Be realistic, my friends," the mayor said. "Don't do anything drastic tomorrow."

However, city officials today said an informant within the union had warned them that the wildcat strike was being organized by the union leadership and that the campaign might be prolonged.

Personnel Director Bruce Andrews said the informant told city officials that the COPMEA leadership has instructed its members to take turns calling in sick so that workers in individual departments can maximize the impact of their allotted sick days.

When city officials learned of the organized campaign Tuesday, Daken declared a state of emergency in City Hall and adopted a contingency plan that already is being implemented.

City workers who called in sick today were asked to prove their illness with a letter from their physician or show up for work

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