

Union ordered to pay commuters for traffic jam Montreal civic workers had tied up streets around city hall in illegal strike

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MONTREAL -- It may go down as the most expensive traffic jam in Montreal history.

A Quebec Superior Court judge has ordered Montreal's blue-collar-workers' union to pay \$1.16 million in damages for inconveniencing drivers during a wild, three-hour illegal strike in Old Montreal four years ago.

On the morning of Sept. 17, 2003, more than 300 blue-collar workers angry about the city's contract offer converged on Montreal city hall. From across the city, they arrived in 150 city-owned vehicles -- forklifts, sidewalk cleaners, dump trucks and vans. They honked horns and blocked several streets.

The traffic jam made Boris Coll 30 minutes late for work. Irked, he launched a class-action lawsuit, claiming he and other innocent bystanders should get \$650 a piece for their trouble.

In a decision handed down Monday, Judge Pierrette Sevigny ruled the union was responsible for inconveniencing 35,435 people and must pay damages, though she considered Coll's \$650-a-person compensation request too high. Instead, Sevigny arrived at a figure of \$25 a person. That amounts to \$885,875. With interest, it grows to \$1.16 million.

Concluding it would be difficult to distribute the cash to those affected, the judge ordered it split between two organizations that help the homeless -- the Old Brewery Mission and L'Acceuil Bonneau.

Sevigny agreed with the union's contention that the protest was not officially sanctioned by the union's executive.

But once the union learned of the protest, it didn't do anything to try to stop it, she ruled, adding that it's "inconceivable" that such a big protest was organized without some union help.

The judge compared the ruling against the union to parents held responsible for damage their children cause.

City workers may now think twice before causing such chaos again, said Bruce Johnston, the lawyer who represented Coll.

"This kind of behaviour won't be tolerated," he said. "If they were to repeat similar behaviour and take the public hostage, this scenario could be repeated."

He said the suit was necessary because the workers don't appear to be accountable to anyone. The only punishment the city meted out was to dock their pay, he said.

This for "intentionally creating a traffic jam with the employer's trucks. In my view, that would be grounds for dismissal."

The union -- Local 301 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees -- has a history of aggressive labour disruptions.

Union officials did not return calls Tuesday. The union has 30 days to appeal the ruling.

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