

Remarks ignite furor

Mayor Anne Marie DeCicco-Best says comments made by the head of the union are 'intimidating'

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The head of the city's transit union has made personal and "intimidating" remarks about her that suggest violence against women, a furious Mayor Anne Marie DeCicco-Best charged yesterday.

"Clearly he is making comments that are meant to be intimidating. They can't be tolerated," she fumed.

Several women's advocates joined the mayor's call for action against Pat Hunniford, with one calling for his removal as union president.

But Hunniford countered yesterday his words were being twisted for political gain and if anyone is being threatened, it's striking workers.

"When the mayor says we are being unreasonable and greedy and we get threats from people saying they're going to smash beer bottles in our face or kill us when we get back on the job, is she responsible for that?" he said.

The war of words exploded yesterday over comments Hunniford made on Monday, shortly after announcing striking workers had rejected the latest offer from the London Transit Commission.

Hunniford told reporters the union would take its battle to city hall and set up pickets there.

"It could be as early as tomorrow or late this week or maybe next -- we're not going to tell them when we are coming," he said.

"(Mayor) Anne Marie (DeCicco-Best) may hear footsteps coming."

He was quoted on radio as saying, "If Anne Marie (DeCicco-Best) hears footsteps, it could be us."

Those comments prompted the mayor yesterday to seek legal advice, call for a community censure of Hunniford and demand at least an apology.

"That would be a start," she said of an apology.

"Do you know how much work I do at night and alone? I have never feared for my safety and I'm not going to now because someone makes these comments, but it is extremely inappropriate. This goes way beyond the issues. He has made this very personal."

London has worked hard to prevent violence against women and this kind of comment from a union leader undermines that effort, she said.

"He has to be held accountable."

Leaders of several women's agencies agreed the comments were at the least inappropriate and at worst, examples of violence against women.

"It resonates in a way with a woman that it may not with a man," said Barbara MacQuarrie, community director of the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children at the University of Western Ontario .

"All women at some point have felt unsafe. We don't need that kind of language. It is playing on a woman's vulnerability."

Megan Walker, head of the London Abused Women's Centre, called on the Amalgamated Transit Union to remove Hunniford as president of Local 741.

"The comments are alarming. When we have a union president that makes threats, it is sending a message to other employees it is OK to do this. It sets a culture."

What a target of a comment thinks and feels is more important than what outsiders think, added Louis Pitre, head of the Sexual Assault Centre London.

"The mayor is saying, I feel threatened."

But Hunniford insisted yesterday his comments were harmless.

"People walking up and down the picket lines. That is what the comments referred to. If she hears footsteps under her office window it will be us."

For the 24 days of the strike, picketing transit workers have been peaceful and co-operative with police, he said.

"People are on a campaign to make us look like bullies and thugs."

DeCicco-Best said yesterday she received several calls from community leaders.

"They were asking me if I'm OK, if I feel safe?"

Neither she nor others took the comments or their tone as merely political, the mayor said.

"He has made this very personal. This goes way beyond the issues of bargaining."