

City strike: A deal is there - if both sides move now

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[Royson James](#)

We are at the most dangerous period of the city workers' strike. A deal is there for the making, and should be in place within days, not weeks. But to miss the opportunity to settle now is to risk spiralling toward weeks of bitterness and strife.

Driving the agenda is Mayor David Miller's decision to go public with the city's amended offer last Friday. It was the best available strategy to end the strike – even if it was late, and even if the strike is unwarranted.

Those who expected the union to immediately accept the city's offer are being unrealistic. You don't take your membership out on strike and then grab the first real offer management makes and say, "Thank you, boss."

A more rational expectation foresees amended offers being exchanged a couple of times before both sides settle on a face-saving contract that fulfils the political agenda of each side.

Miller admitted yesterday that "between January and this weekend there was no movement on the key issues."

And, suddenly, there's a "little bit of light." So, going public on the contract offer has worked.

The publicized offer shows the city has moved toward a more moderate position. The union has now responded. Both sides are managing intense pressure to find an accommodation in the middle somewhere. They cannot maintain a hard line because the public now knows they cannot possibly be too far apart.

On wages, after starting out with a pay freeze, the city is offering 1 per cent this year and next, 2 per cent in 2011 and 3 per cent in 2012. The union started out at 3 per cent each year. The saw-off point is between 1.5 per cent and 2 per cent.

On the controversial banking of sick days, even the most diehard unionist knows this provision is over. Everyone knows Miller cannot trigger a strike on this and then capitulate. And we know the union's resolve. So, find a way to craft some concessions to compensate for the loss.

The city offer gives the workers a short-term disability plan instead of the paid sick days. They also have long-term disability for extended illness. And they'll get an immediate sick day payout, averaging \$8,500, to help cushion the blow of lost wages because of the strike.

Union leaders probably have less-publicized concerns that will make life easier for groups of workers and are pushing for gains in these areas – especially for seasonal workers.



SARAH DEA/TORONTO STAR

As trash continued to pile up at the corner of Spadina Ave. and St. Andrew St. July 13, 2009, city and union representatives tried to come to an agreement.

But the march is toward settlement, not more machismo.

If this analysis holds true, Torontonians are correct in asking why we needed weeks of disruption.

When *Star* employees go on strike, management and workers share grave concerns that readers might move on and never return – damaging the industry and reducing jobs and profits.

At city hall, there is no such incentive. Miller isn't concerned about losing money or customers. If costs rise, so will taxes. The real considerations are political and personal.

Notice that as soon as it became clear that the public was fed up with both sides – and the mayor's approval rating threatened to slide off the map – city hall made an offer worth considering.

Miller must have known that by proposing a pay freeze and a large number of take-aways he was forcing the union to strike.

He knows civic workers will strike for 14 weeks or months, whatever it takes. You can't bluff them.

Which means he planned for and walked deliberately into a strike because, presumably, the status quo is so damaging to Toronto's civic future.

With respect, the city has failed to make that case.

Royson James usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

Email: rjames@thestar.ca