

## Only a fair contract will settle the strike

Jul 14, 2009 04:30 AM

[Comments on this story](#) (13)

John Cartwright

President of the Toronto and York Region Labour Council

The strike by City of Toronto employees is truly regrettable, and truly avoidable. When CUPE locals 79 and 416 entered collective bargaining early this year, nobody could imagine that their members would be walking picket lines by summer.

Taking strike action is not something done lightly. But negotiations dragged on for six months with no progress. By the weekend of the strike date, there were still dozens of concession demands tabled by management, as well as the assertion that front-line CUPE members should accept the wage freeze imposed on supervisors and senior bureaucrats.

Very few people realize that for eight years in the 1990s, City of Toronto and Metro Toronto workers went without a wage increase. Eight years – with no thanks from the public or the politicians. Since then, their increases have still not caught up with inflation. On the other hand, managers and supervisors continued to be awarded "merit bonuses" of up to 3 per cent every year, over and above the general cost of living increases. In other words, the upper echelon was seeing their incomes jump by 5 per cent to 6 per cent every year, with barely a peep of complaint from the media or conservative councillors, while every raise for front-line workers was met with howls of outrage.

The mayor has chosen to use sick time as a defining issue of these negotiations. The fact is that the current arrangement has been in place for more than 60 years, and back then was a trade-off against wages. It is actually a severance benefit – the only one front-line city workers receive. In other jurisdictions, retirement benefits are often calculated as one or more weeks per year of service.

Let's understand something else. Across Ontario CUPE has negotiated dozens of municipal agreements in the last year without major concessions – except in Windsor where that mayor's approach has led to a bitter three-month strike. Most of those settlements were similar to the pattern in place for our police, firefighters, transit and housing workers.

All of those other cities face fiscal pressures due to the recession, but somehow they managed to settle contracts that worked. They found a way to "get to yes" without forcing their employees out onto the street.

Workers didn't cause this global financial crisis, and should not be the ones paying for it. During the boom, the salaries of Bay Street CEOs skyrocketed, and corporate profits reached the highest levels in history. Companies were getting lavish tax cuts, even when they were shedding Canadian jobs and outsourcing work offshore.

It is their economic model that is failing Canadians – a globalization shaped by deregulation, privatization and unrestricted trade deals. The fiscal crisis of our cities, created by the Harris amalgamation and downloading, was also part of that arrangement. And it has not been resolved by the Queen's Park Liberals.

During the last provincial election, we warned that the failure to upload social service and welfare costs would have huge implications when the economy slowed down. That is the true "elephant in the room" at these negotiations.

In the face of the never-ending budget crunch, conservative councillors continue to demand contracting

out, wage freezes and privatization. Some go so far as to suggest that privatization would mean no garbage strikes – ignoring the strike last year in Peel region by workers of the private waste collector. Don't forget, that in a democratic society people still do have the right to withdraw their labour.

Miller is being urged to hang tough against his own employees. Don't be surprised if many of those who coax him to take the hardest line will be firmly behind an opposing candidate for mayor next year. They relish the thought of Miller burning bridges to his labour base, and will attack him relentlessly after it is over.

Since the strike began, workers from other unions have been out supporting our CUPE brothers and sisters. Autoworker, hotel workers, unemployed Steelworkers, teachers and education workers, those who work in the provincial and federal sectors, and construction trades have turned out in solidarity. The fact is the strike will not be settled until a fair contract is put on the table by the city's negotiators – without take-aways. We hope that happens soon.