


There will be a political price for chaos from strike

So let's get this straight: After 35 days, the deal allows both sides to win, while the taxpaying spectators lose? Really?

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Hip, hip, hooray. The 35-day municipal strike is over. Way too late; not a moment too soon.

Without releasing details of the deal – the mayor and union leaders say they must first inform rank and file members at a ratification vote tomorrow – both sides claim to have won what they sought and fought for.

City: "We want concessions."

Union: "Over our dead bodies."

"Concessions, big concessions!"

"No concessions!"

"Yes!!"

"No!!"

STRIKE!!! Then, yesterday:

"We were able to beat back all concessions," said union head Mark Ferguson.

"The settlement is within the mandate set" by the city's bargaining team, Mayor David Miller countered.

Hmmm. Strange sport, this labour relations game. It allows both sides to win, while the taxpaying spectators lose? Pardon the skepticism. We'll see about that when the details trickle out.

So while both sides claimed victory yesterday, the public accounting is only now beginning in the summer that never was.

Toronto is a city trying to figure out why it had to endure garbage in its parks, greater exposure to H1N1, dangerously low levels of ambulance coverage and other untold dangers and disruptions for a poorly defined goal.

What did we win, again?

There will be a political price to pay for the controlled chaos of a Toronto strike that seemed to resolve so little while disrupting so much.

Minus all the weasel words and spin expected over the next few days, the city drew a line in the sand over the issue of workers banking sick days for a retirement payout of up to six months pay. And Miller was not prepared to pay the workers full value for taking away the benefit.



TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR

Mayor David Miller meets with media at city hall July 27, 2009 to announce a tentative deal.

If the benefit stays or the city paid out the full amount owing to end the practice, then the strike was a colossal blunder on Miller's part. That deal was available on day one.

And if the union leaders caved after costing their members five weeks' wages, how do they escape the axe?

For today, let's celebrate the return to work of our neighbours, the 30,000 civic workers who keep public services moving in Toronto. And think about five lessons learned from the strike.

One, Torontonians are a proud, peaceful and patient lot. They personally cleaned the streets, mowed playing fields, tended city gardens and endured the hardships with aplomb and only the occasional bluster.

Two, ambulance is an essential service. The province should make it so. The current protocol that guarantees, during a strike, 75 per cent of normal ambulance service is irresponsible. People died waiting for an ambulance. By the end the city was asking for court intervention to add 75 paramedics and 27 ambulances because response times had increased by one minute.

Three, if Toronto is as broke as it says it is, the mayor and council need to act like it. They have zero credibility with their employees and even less with the public when they go on a hiring spree, give themselves pay raises and then try to stiff their rank and file members.

Four, citizens and politicians should end the over-heated rhetoric about crushing the unions, firing them all, et cetera, when workers stage a legal job action. It solves nothing. It sours labour relations. It devalues the work of the public service. It is a no-win strategy.

Five, it is extremely difficult for a pro-union guy to take on the unions. The public didn't take Miller's bluster seriously. They never believed he was on their side. And the unions resented his every utterance.

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