

## Note to Miller: Blaming workers a poor strategy

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It's been more than a week since Mayor David Miller told striking city workers, "enough is enough," a desperate cry that moved few hearts and minds on the picket line.

Yesterday, Miller may have hardened union resolve by blaming the strikers for hurting Toronto's vulnerable people and threatening to sink the city into bankruptcy.

A week ago Miller tabled the first offer designed to spark action at the bargaining table. It offered a tiny pay raise and proposed to buy the workers out of their cushy sick-pay benefit the city has targeted for termination.

It seemed the city wanted to end the strike. Negotiations would land us somewhere between the city's 1 per cent raise offer and the union's 3 per cent. And the other thorny issues would be worked out on a "give a little, take a little" ethic.

Not so. Both sides appear deadlocked. Worse, they continue to provoke with half-truths and blame that is certain to inflame.

Apparently, the city's offer is pretty close to a final one. If it isn't, the mayor is playing a negotiating game of chicken even as he accuses the union of lacking a sense of urgency. And if it is essentially a final offer, the strike is no way near over.

The unions answered the city's proposal with counter-offers, not made public. While both sides are talking, facilitated by mediators, communication is a challenge.

"We need to find a way for people to say yes," Miller told a news conference yesterday. He said he was frustrated at the slow pace of the talks. He said the labour disruption was "a strike against the most vulnerable" – people on welfare, kids and those who depend on daycare. And, in effect, the city would go bankrupt if it acceded to the union demands.

Then, as if he had no tools to trigger a settlement, he said: "There needs to be some real sense of urgency." The message? The unions were foot-dragging – a galling charge to a union that accused the city of the same four weeks ago.

If yesterday's remarks were designed to allay fears of a protracted strike, they did the opposite.

"The longer the strike continues, the more resistant members are to giving up hard-won benefits and working conditions," said union leader Mark Ferguson yesterday.

Yes, he could be bluffing, scared of losing member support. But don't bet on it.

Understand that neither side is, as yet, motivated to move off their public stance in this strike.

Management still believes that workers will come crawling back to work after missing a month's wages. They might consider Windsor, where workers turned down the latest offer after more than three months off the job.

One expects tough talk from the mayor as a negotiating posture. But to blame city workers for Toronto's fiscal woes is not a viable strategy. It's part of the political sales job to the public; it will also stiffen the backs of the strikers.

Why? Because it is at variance with the facts. Toronto's fiscal squeeze has been a long time coming, the product of years of council decisions, and recent ones made even as Miller formulated the current strike strategy.

So, as Miller clings to the falsehood that Toronto's fiscal woes were caused by the worldwide recession, he continues to cling to a 2.42 per cent pay raise for councillors, approved after the recession hit. Give the same hike to city workers and the strike is over, no?

If Miller's going to connect with striking workers and move them off the picket line, he will have to come clean and establish fiscal credibility. Or back down.

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