

End rumour and rancour, CUPE: Reveal your offer

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Rarely has Toronto seen its city management and civic unions talk so long about so much and agree on so little.

Heading into Day 32 of Toronto's civic workers' strike, wouldn't it be nice to know just what separates both sides? How far apart are they?

All we know is what the city offered almost two weeks ago – a modest, underwhelming wage hike of 1 per cent, 1 per cent, 2 per cent, and 3 per cent over four years; and an offer to buy out the workers' accumulated sick bank benefits (currently a maximum six months pay) at a much reduced rate.

Mayor David Miller thinks that is fair and affordable. And by releasing the offer to the public, and strategically, to the rank and file, Miller was speaking directly over the heads of furious union leaders to members on the picket line. Miller's unconventional move sparked a flurry of real bargaining. Then, nothing.

A couple more weeks of this stalemate, as July turns to the vacation month of August, and the average citizen won't care enough to listen to either side. So, if the Canadian Union of Public Employees has the slightest concern about public opinion, it might want to tell us, while we are listening, just what it considers fair and affordable.

CUPE can claim it is going public, an unusual move, to put its side on the record and correct "errors" or the overly pro-city spin of the mayor's public disclosure. It could retool its strike settlement proposal to the city, post it on the Internet and have everyone judge if it is fair and affordable to both sides.

On the "sick bank" issue, will the unions agree to end the practice, if the city is prepared to honour the time the workers have earned? Is there wiggle room there for a buyout of no less than 80 per cent, or five months?

Would the union proposal reflect a 2 per cent annual wage hike, for two years, till the current fiscal turbulence subsides?

That's what thoughtful citizens are wondering, amidst the anti-union bile hurled from many quarters.

Problem is, this labour dispute could get off the rails quickly. The union may need to strike a high-risk posture to get its message out.

Currently, the city is winning the public relations war, but barely. Status quo likely means even more angry residents or, equally hurtful to the striking workers, indifferent ones. The last thing a striking union wants is "business as usual." That means everybody else is making money even as the workers are missing mortgage payments and shopping for macaroni and cheese.

The growing numbers – admittedly, still a tiny percentage of the strikers – who are moving to go back to work and leave their fellow workers at the barricades is a first warning sign. CUPE does need to make a push to change the discussion, or watch its workers grow dispirited under the avalanche of criticism.

Union officials often negotiate and leave members on the picket line, in a fog. Rumours proliferate in the soil of uncertainty and lack of information:

Management husbands tell rank-and-file wives the city's brass is steeled to carry on till October, or is it September? Others say 3,900 non-union staff are exhausted and barely holding on, hence the push to add strikebreakers willing to cross the picket line. Or are they revelling in the loads of overtime they're pocketing?

What exactly do the workers want? The "ask" will be more than the average jealous private sector worker wants to hand over. But it will focus a debate that might end the strike.

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