

Council's weak excuses

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Armed with excuses ranging from the puzzling to the absurd, most Toronto city councillors are still stubbornly clinging to their much-criticized 2.42 per cent pay hike. The hypocrisy of taking that increase – even as the city froze the salaries of its non-union staff and demanded restraint from unionized workers – has fuelled tensions in a bitter strike that is now dragging into its 12th day. For the sake of progress in the labour dispute, these excuses need to end.

Councillor Doug Holyday is building support for a petition seeking a special meeting of city council to roll back the pay hike. As of yesterday, with Raymond Cho agreeing to back the petition, 18 councillors were on-side, according to Holyday. But 26 others, plus Mayor David Miller, remain opposed to the meeting. A majority of 23 is required to force the meeting.

In a survey by the *Star*, several opponents of the roll-back, including Miller, noted that they have personally returned their raises to the city. This is a puzzling argument. They clearly considered the pay hike to be ill-judged. Otherwise, why refuse it? Yet by supporting other councillors' entitlement to a raise denied to city employees, they indulge in hypocrisy. One can only speculate whether this stance stems from a reluctance on the part of Miller and others to upset allies on council. What's certain is that the public is poorly served by such contradictory signals during a strike.

Other councillors, including Ron Moeser, said they are giving their raise to charity. While commendable, this doesn't blunt the hypocrisy of accepting a salary increase denied to others. Unlike Moeser, non-union city workers were given no opportunity to donate their raise to a favourite charity.

Still others, like Pam McConnell and Suzan Hall, insisted that reversing the salary increase would make no material difference in this strike. Hall described the idea as "more symbolic than anything." But symbols can be meaningful. While no one can predict the ultimate impact on the strike of a pay rollback by city councillors, it seems at least worth giving it a try. At the very least, it would deprive the striking union of one argument in its public relations arsenal.

Then there are John Fillion and Bill Saundercook, who argued that the 2.42 per cent hike wasn't a pay raise at all. Rather, it was a "cost-of-living increase." The distinction is likely to escape most residents.

Saundercook further argued that he deserves an increase because being a councillor is his only job. Every city employee would be entitled to the same raise under that flawed reasoning. Few of them have a second occupation.

Even more absurd were Frank Di Giorgio's characterization of the pay raise as a "contract" that mustn't be broken and Howard Moscoe's assertion that he's "already spent the money" and can't comment further because his daughter is a striking city worker.

Finally, some of Holyday's critics on council trashed his effort to roll back their pay as "political grandstanding." It could more accurately be described as setting an example.