

## Miller pushes hard for deal

Close vote expected at city council today as outside workers ratify controversial contract

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Toronto Mayor David Miller was working the phones hard last night amid a chorus of criticism calling for councillors to vote down the city's new deal with its civic workers.

City council was to meet today to sign off on the new three-year contract with its two CUPE locals, which ratified the deal over the last two days.

Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 416, representing Toronto's 6,000 outside workers including garbage collectors, voted yesterday by "a healthy margin" to return to work early this morning and get the city cleaned up, although curbside garbage collection for Toronto residents won't begin until Tuesday.

Local 79, representing 24,000 inside workers, ratified the agreement Wednesday.

With a municipal election set for next year, the councillors face a tough balancing act.

On the one hand, the city gave in on the controversial sick bank. The agreement allows existing employees to continue to bank 18 sick days a year, and accumulate up to six months of unused sick time to be paid out when they leave or retire. Though the benefit is set to end for new hires, it has angered many residents, especially those who work in the private sector.

On the other hand, councillors know that voting down the agreement means prolonging the strike, which would also infuriate a public fed up with mounting garbage around the city.

It's expected to be a close vote, with 11 fiscally conservative councillors – the Responsible Government Group – saying they plan to oppose the contract over the sick bank provision, and a handful of councillors still undecided.

"The people of Toronto didn't expect this kind of deal. They expected the sick bank benefit to be gone," said councillor Case Ootes, one of the members of the group, which held a press conference yesterday.

The group, which says it has received hundreds of emails and phone calls from constituents urging them to reject the deal, wants the city to continue negotiating for a better deal with the unions. Ootes said if that means the strike continues, his group will take the heat for that.

"I don't think the public wanted the strike (to end) at any cost," Ootes said.



DAVID COOPER/TORONTO STAR

*Mark Ferguson, president of CUPE Local 416, talks to union members as they arrive to vote at the Ontario Federation of Labour on Gervais Dr., July 30, 2009.*

Battered by critics, Miller came out swinging yesterday, telling reporters they'll see a "new level of anger" from the public if the strike continues and services don't resume today.

"It's essential to this city that we get people back to work and resume our services," Miller said.

Launching a salvo at the Responsible Government Group, Miller used the example of the family that runs the Centreville amusement park for children at Centre Island, which has been closed because ferry service has been halted. The family's business, he said, provides summer jobs for students who need to pay their tuition.

"Those kids who want to pay for university, these guys (the 11 councillors) want to keep them out of work some more? Let's get serious. Members of council understand that, and that's the message I'm going to be delivering.

"I believe members of council will be responsible and vote for the settlement," Miller said.

A spokesperson for the mayor said yesterday Miller had sent a memo to councillors and was speaking to them on the phone in a bid to sell the deal.

Miller also attacked the group for behaving in a manner that was "beneath contempt." He said the group sullied the reputation of city staff by implying that the city's negotiating team stepped beyond their bounds by agreeing to the sick bank provision, a provision the city's employee and labour relations committee was told was going to be taken off the table.

Councillor Karen Stintz, a member of the fiscally conservative group, later said the members weren't attacking staff for the concession, but rather Miller himself.

Following last night's ratification vote, Local 416 union president Mark Ferguson said he has "every reason to believe" the deal will pass. Ferguson said he wasn't concerned that some city councillors have publicly opposed it.

"There is no reason to worry about ratification from our perspective," he said.

But he made it clear no garbage will be removed from transfer stations or temporary dump sites until city council approves the deal. If it goes through, Ferguson said he hopes to have temporary dump sites cleaned up by the end of Sunday.

"The strike from our perspective is now over," he said to thunderous cheers from 416 members. "It's up to city council to do their part."

How the votes will shake down at council today though is unclear.

Several councillors informally polled this week said they're waiting to see the agreement before making a decision.

Councillor Suzan Hall is one of several undecided.

"I have to see what's there (in the deal). But do we want the strike to go further?" she said. "I have not seen the details of this agreement and, I think in this case, the devil is in the details," said councillor Ron Moeser, another in the undecided camp.

Meanwhile, it appears Toronto's medical officer of health had grave public health concerns about the city's strike lasting beyond the end of the month, worries that would likely have convinced Ontario's chief medical health officer to recommend back to work legislation.

As the strike entered its sixth week, Toronto's medical officer of health Dr. David McKeown became increasingly concerned about the "cumulative effects" of the loss of the services caused by the fact public health workers were among those on the picket lines.

"By the end of the month, I was becoming quite concerned about the impact of the loss of health services," McKeown said last night.

McKeown was providing regular updates to Ontario's chief medical officer of health, Dr. Arlene King, who has the authority to recommend that the province end the strike for public health reasons.

King could not be reached for comment but McKeown said as Aug. 1 approached, he was becoming alarmed about the loss or reduction of key services such as home visits after high-risk births, sexual health counselling, food safety and restaurant inspections. He was also worried the critical "ramping up" needed to prepare for an anticipated second wave of H1N1 flu in the fall would be delayed.

Miller, who kept in constant contact with McKeown, said yesterday the shortage of public health workers "wasn't sustainable forever."

*With files from Jason Miller*