

Miller's tactics raise questions

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Times of crisis can build political reputations – or shatter them – depending on how well a leader rises to the challenge. As mayor, David Miller has confronted no crisis greater than the strike by 30,000 Toronto municipal workers, now in its 39th day. If not shattered, his reputation as an effective leader is certainly cracked.

At the outset of this labour dispute Miller served notice that he was determined to end a costly and outdated "sick bank" system giving workers cash for up to 130 unused sick days on retirement. Yesterday he declared victory and repeatedly claimed that the tentative agreements reached Monday had "eliminated" the sick bank provision.

But employees with 10 years' seniority, or more, remain eligible for 18 sick days each year, and they can bank these until retirement, receiving the same generous payout as before. This does not represent "elimination" in the sense that most Torontonians understand it. True, new employees would no longer get this perk, so the proposed contract does constitute a closing of the bank over time, once everyone now eligible retires or accepts a buyout.

Pressed on this matter yesterday, Miller finally conceded it is more accurate to say the sick bank is being phased out rather than eliminated now. In truth, it is being phased out in slow motion. While that is a step forward, some Torontonians may see it as scant reward for enduring a strike that lasted almost six weeks, especially after Miller made progress on this issue a defining measure of his success.

The mayor made several other missteps over the course of the walkout. Despite multiple examples of pickets blocking residents' access to temporary dump sites, and even keeping welfare offices from opening, city officials opted not to file court injunctions. Only two successful injunctions were announced over the entire course of the strike. If this lenient policy was meant to curry union favour, it failed.

Even before the walkout, Miller didn't adequately prepare Torontonians for the struggle to come. There was never a real sense of looming crisis until the crisis actually hit. Miller's warnings about hard times facing the city, and pleas that "the world has changed," were contradicted by his defence of a 2.4 per cent, business-as-usual, pay raise pocketed by city councillors. Having made that mistake earlier in the year, Miller compounded it during the strike by refusing to support a determined effort by some councillors to roll back the salary hike.

These missteps, and others, are grounds for Torontonians to wonder if Miller is the best person to lead this city when unionized workers are in a position to strike again three years from now.