

Pick up pace in strike talks

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With the strike by Toronto's municipal workers entering its fifth week, negotiations to settle the dispute seem oddly lethargic.

Today, the work stoppage has the dubious distinction of matching a 30-day strike by the old City of Toronto garbage collectors in 1972. Only one local garbage dispute has lasted longer in recent history: a gruelling 38-day strike by Etobicoke's trash collectors in 1984. And that record might well fall next week, given the glacial rate of progress at the bargaining table.

It is important that both sides in the dispute bring a greater sense of urgency and energy to their negotiations. After all, they have every incentive to end this strike because virtually everyone is being hurt by it.

The 30,000 members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, now walking a picket line, have so far lost about 8 per cent of their pay for this year. Given the current hard times and resulting pressures on the city's budget, they are unlikely to win wage increases that will come close to covering what they have already sacrificed. And their financial hole deepens with every day that the strike drags on.

The politicians stand to lose, too – not financially, as they are still being paid, but in plunging approval numbers. The public is rightly outraged by councillors' hypocritical decision to give themselves a 2.42 per cent pay increase while demanding restraint from the city's employees. There is also a pervasive sense that the handling of this dispute has been bungled by those in charge. Mayor David Miller, in particular, was diminished even before *Maclean's* magazine depicted him crammed into a garbage can on its most recent cover.

Meanwhile, Toronto residents are caught in the middle of this dispute in multiple ways. Mounds of garbage foul neighbourhood parks; daycare spaces are closed; children are denied access to swimming pools and city-run summer camps; public health worries mount over the lack of preparedness for the H1N1 virus; businesses can't get essential permits; the tourism sector is being hammered; the reliability of ambulance service has been called into question; and thousands of young people are losing out on summer jobs.

For everyone's sake – young or old, rich or poor, labour or management – a new focus is needed on ending this strike. It isn't enough to note that "talks are continuing." They've done so since the beginning of the walkout, and for months before that. What's needed now is a healthy dose of goodwill and fresh determination from all sides. Then bargaining might speedily produce an acceptable settlement.