


City strike keeps public in the dark

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Torontonians should be forgiven if they are feeling more like spectators in their own city than residents.

After the events of the recent city workers' strike, about which we still know next to nothing, it's hard to feel like anything but an afterthought, at best a bit player in a drama involving city council and the unions. Most often, however, we are the audience.

We sit, watch and wait.

We also pay the bills, elect our leaders, even create the mess the strikers clean up and provide the kids they look after in daycare, but nobody tells us anything.

Mayor David Miller spends the day after a tentative settlement is reached talking to anyone with a microphone in their hand – and says nothing, except to ask us to hang in just a few more days ... that is, until late last night when he agrees to let workers return right after ratification. He can't tell us what the terms of the deal are, how much it will cost us or what concessions were made, but it's all good, especially considering it was unnecessary in the first place.

Nice of him to drop by for a chat.

In the meantime, the unions have spent five weeks snarling and biting the hands that feed them – we mean ours, not council's sticky little fingers.

Just because the battle is fought in our name, doesn't mean we have a meaningful role to play. Is it any wonder we feel so utterly irrelevant? We are.

The endless blather about civic engagement and democracy really amounts to nothing. When Miller was elected mayor six years ago, the hope was that he would bring politics out of the backrooms and into the open. For reasons that go well beyond the man, that hasn't happened and won't anytime soon.

Regardless of the issue – whether garbage collection, choosing new TTC vehicles or approving a proposed condo – things are seldom – no, never – what they seem.

Maybe that has always been the case, but as the strike reminded us, and painfully, governance has come close to being a sham.

The fact that so many were willing to put up with the inconvenience of a strike, albeit grudgingly, is reassuring and worrisome at the same time. Reassuring because it indicates that even Torontonians with their overly developed sense of entitlement are willing to adapt and even pitch in; worrisome because it indicates feelings of alienation that apparently have reached the point where we no longer expect anything to work.

When Miller did reveal details of the city's offer, the unions screamed bloody murder and accused him of bargaining through the media. Their fear of transparency was, well, transparent.

For example, few commentators have pointed out that the strike's most irksome issue – the banking of sick days – was introduced in better times to cut rampant absenteeism. Insiders will tell you that without this incentive, city employees would take more time off work than they already do.

If they are correct, the elimination of this provision will lead inevitably to an increase in the number of missed days, and a decrease in city workers' efficiency. Put another way, it means costs will go up when we can least afford it.

This, of course, is not what we will be told. Instead, when we hear from the city and its unions both will claim to have won.

"Who blinked?" a headline in the *Star* asked yesterday. Good question, but how can you blink when your eyes are already closed?

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