

It's time to put strike behind us

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Finally, after a weekend of round-the-clock bargaining, a settlement emerged yesterday in a gruelling five-week strike by Toronto's municipal workers. It is a pity it took so long.

The decisive factor appears to have been a bold midnight Sunday deadline set by Mark Ferguson, head of Local 416 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (the outside workers). He threatened to end the talks if there were no deal by then. It was a gamble that risked a much lengthier strike, but the threat appeared to galvanize the talks toward a successful conclusion yesterday morning.

Talks with CUPE Local 79 (the inside workers) were more complicated, involving four separate collective agreements and many more part-time employees. It took a bit longer, but the parties in that contract dispute reached a tentative agreement yesterday afternoon.

These developments surely come as welcome news to everyone anxious to see this strike end – from the city's 30,000 unionized workers to the long-suffering public. With the respective deals yet to be ratified, it's too early to pop celebratory champagne corks. There is good reason, however, for optimism.

As for who won this conflict, it's premature to judge, as the full details of the contract are being kept under wraps until after ratification. But Mayor David Miller's leadership is likely to be called into question by critics reviewing the course of the crisis. Did Miller do a proper job preparing Toronto residents and the unions for a tough round of negotiations by laying out the financial challenges facing the city? Why didn't he push city councillors to set an example by freezing their own pay? Were the gains in the contract worth a five-week strike? These and other questions will be raised in the coming months.

In the immediate future, however, what remains is for the unions and the city to sign a contract and for workers to get back on the job.

Now in its sixth week, this strike has been an ordeal for Canada's largest city, compared to the 16-day walkout by municipal workers in 2002. Strikes lasting an extended time can leave a legacy of bitterness, and Ferguson warned yesterday that "a lot of ill will" remains. Local 79 leader Ann Dembinski reiterated that view. "Labour relations has been set back decades," she said, even as she announced a tentative deal with the city.

That would be unfortunate. In the interests of the public that they serve, both sides at city hall, labour and management, should make a determined effort to put any lingering tensions to rest.

Torontonians appear to have weathered this walkout with remarkable patience. There were many instances of healthy community spirit as people removed garbage for their disabled or elderly neighbours, or mowed grass in a public park so children could play soccer, or discovered the advantages of backyard composting.

More of that spirit will be necessary in the days and weeks to come. It will take time to gear up city services and for all employees to return to work. Even after they do, the piles of garbage heaped in our parks won't disappear at once. Nor will the many smaller mounds kept by residents in their homes or garages.

It will take time. But with continued understanding, civility, and forbearance, Torontonians can emerge from this strike with a clean and strong city that will once again inspire pride.