


Desperate union takes giant gamble

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By midnight tomorrow, Toronto could be nearing the end of the five-week-old civic strike or hopelessly adrift, without an apparent solution.

It's a gamble worth embracing – a giant risk undertaken by desperate union leaders whose members are wilting on the picket lines.

In a bold move that calls the city's bluff and turns the pressure on the mayor, union leader Mark Ferguson has in effect told Mayor David Miller to put up or shut up.

Settle with the 30,000 striking workers by midnight tomorrow or union negotiators are walking away from contract talks to camp out with the strikers on the picket line.

"I'm a patient man but I'm close to the end of my rope," Ferguson said. Then, he added Miller's own words: "Enough is enough."

Well, that's good. Nothing else seems capable of moving city hall and its striking unions close to a settlement. Rank-and-file workers have begun crossing the picket lines to head back to work, weakening the union's hands. Non-union managers are stressed to exhaustion, working round the clock to keep the city afloat. Keeping them buoyant, when just months ago the mayor froze their salaries and disrespected their contribution, is a growing concern.

And the public is furious at both sides.

Besides, concerns about the city's health – the big wild card in any civic strike – are surfacing daily. Yesterday, the city confirmed ambulance delays are a minute greater since the strike and responses to medical emergencies have fallen below acceptable levels. Give us more ambulances and paramedics, they are pleading in court.

Last week, the region's flu expert warned of more deaths from swine flu because of the strike.

And temporary garbage dumps proliferate, each one adding to the chorus of protests and anger from affected neighbourhoods.

Not surprisingly, Miller moved quickly late yesterday to leave the impression he is just as eager as Ferguson to end the strike.

Putting his spin on the Ferguson ultimatum, Miller issued a statement which says, "I am pleased that Local 416 will now bring that sense of urgency to the table," adding the city will bargain 24 hours a day to reach a settlement.

It's the only thing he could say. For weeks, Miller voiced frustration at the slow progress of talks. The unions "must find a way to say yes," he repeated at each news conference. Now he may have to.

Two weeks ago he publicly released the city's latest offer, a controversial move that angered the unions and elicited charges of "bargaining in bad faith."

If the strategy worked to produce a flurry of exchanges of offers and proposals, it has not produced a deal. A new push is needed.

The union has made a counter offer to the city's publicized offer. City officials have had it for two weeks. We know the city is offering 1 per cent, 1 per cent, 2 per cent, 3 per cent over four years. The unions started out asking for 3 per cent per year. We also know the city wants to yank away the coveted sick-benefit plan that can give a retiring worker up to six months' payout for accumulated sick days.

At issue is how to compensate the union for ending this benefit. Miller is offering a percentage of the amounts the workers have accumulated over the years. The unions, no doubt, claim the workers earned it all.

Clearly, both sides are aching for an out. It could be another two months or more before public health concerns are great enough to trigger back-to-work legislation from the province.

Many union and political careers – not to mention mortgages – are riding on the outcome.

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