

Will strike save city money?

Windsor, suffering through a labour dispute, says taxpayers will get money back when it's all over. Does the same apply for Toronto?

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What if a city strike actually put more money in your pocket?

That's the scenario in Windsor, where officials say their 11-week municipal strike is saving taxpayers \$300,000 a day in wages.

Strike-related costs will lower that figure eventually, but a net savings is expected and officials say some of the money saved will be passed back to residents.

Nearly two weeks into the Toronto civic workers' strike, officials won't say how much the city is saving on wages. But when city council approved Toronto's budget earlier this year, wages and salaries were estimated at \$4 billion, or almost half of the 2009 operating budget.

Councillor Denzil Minnan-Wong thinks the city has saved about \$28 million a week on wages since the strike began, but couldn't confirm that with officials.

"Staff won't calculate it. I've asked them and they've refused," Minnan-Wong said.

"The only answer they can come up with is they don't know the expenses of the strike. But I don't think it would be too difficult to calculate the salary savings."

Some 30,000 municipal workers went on strike June 22, shutting down garbage collection, city-run child care, summer camps and other services.

Minnan-Wong said he has been getting email and phone calls "asking, 'How much are we saving?' I think it's a legitimate piece of information that the public deserves to know."

Financial impact figures likely won't be released until after the strike, city spokesman Kevin Sack says.

"We don't believe that putting out that number without context makes much sense. So until we know what something costs us, I don't think we'd talk about what something saves us."

In telling people it's saving \$300,000 a day on wages, Windsor emphasizes that significant strike-related costs have not yet been factored in.

"We are incurring all kinds of costs while the strike is going on – overtime to non-union staff, security, contractor costs in certain areas," said Helga Reidel, Windsor's general manager of corporate services.



NATHAN DENETTE/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Striking workers picket at Bermondsey Transfer Station June 30, 2009.

Still, the municipality expects a net savings when it's all over.

"In fact, our mayor and council have gone on record as saying they will tabulate the net savings and they will seek some means of returning some money to the taxpayers," Reidel said.

The last civic strike in Toronto, a 16-day work stoppage in 2002, cost the city \$3.3 million.

A post-strike report said wage and other saved costs totalled \$15.3 million, while strike-related costs totalled \$9.9 million, for a savings of \$5.4 million. However, the city suffered a loss of \$8.7 million in revenues such as parks fees.

This time, Toronto is already considering rebates on garbage fees.

Labour negotiations inched ahead yesterday, but the president of the inside workers' local said the sides remain "miles apart."

Ann Dembinski, who heads the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 79, said it would present a "comprehensive" proposal to the city last night.

But she said the strike won't be settled unless the city drops demands for major concessions, including changes to sick-time plans and seniority rules.

Talks also continued yesterday between the city and Local 416, representing outside workers.

The city did not hold its usual daily briefing session, nor did it comment on the talks.

With files from John Spears