

## Time for unions to seize city's sweetened offer

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Now comes the moment of truth. The city's new contract offer to striking workers presents them with a stark choice: accept what looks like a pretty fair deal in hard times, or stay off the job for weeks, perhaps months, in hopes of getting something better.

The answer is blindingly obvious. If they have any sense of reality, the city unions will seize this offer like a drowning man grabs a life ring and end their futile walkout now.

The city wage offer of 7.2 per cent over four years is reasonableness incarnate. Provincial workers got 7.75 per cent over four years in their latest contract, federal workers 6.8 per cent. In London, Ont., city workers accepted a two-year contract with a 1 per cent raise in the first year and 2.65 per cent in the second.

The Toronto offer would give workers 1 per cent in each of the first two years, 2 per cent in the third year and 3 per cent in the fourth. At a time when many private sector companies are freezing wages and cutting jobs, that is nothing to sneeze at. The unions' demand for more than 3 per cent in each year of a new contract – plus improvements to vacation, benefits and shift premiums – is beyond the means of a city that faces falling revenues, rising costs and a ballooning budget shortfall.

City workers can be thankful that, unlike other strapped North American cities, Toronto is not proposing to lay off any workers. Nor is it contracting out services, rolling back pensions or slashing benefits.

Under the city's proposal, workers get to keep their inflation-indexed pension that gives them 70 per cent of their annual average earnings in their five highest-paid years. They get to keep their time-and-a-half overtime pay and their premiums for evening and weekend work. They get to keep their five days of bereavement leave, their six weeks of vacation after 22 years of service (seven weeks after 30) and their generous city-paid dental, medical and drug insurance. The city asks for only two small rollbacks – on dental recall exams and drug dispensing fees – to help control rising costs.

The single major concession demanded by the city is the end of the featherbedding practice of allowing workers to bank 18 sick days a year and cash them in when they retire, a benefit that has saddled Toronto with millions in annual payouts and an unsustainable \$140-million liability. And even this city demand comes with a sweetener. The city would pay out a share of workers' accumulated sick-leave credits, netting employees with more than 10 years of service an average of \$8,500.

Many other Ontario cities have done away with bankable sick leave while still protecting employees' right to be paid if they fall ill. Toronto's proposed new sick plan would cover workers for up to six months of illness in a year.

Of course, Toronto's unions could choose to scorn this offer, and they were overflowing with outrage when they heard about it yesterday. But do they honestly expect to get more? The public is hostile, the city determined to control costs and the provincial government disinclined to step in. If they don't seize this perfectly acceptable offer and go back to work now, they face a long, lonely time on the barricades.