

## **The Mayor has nowhere to turn**

You know there's trouble when the anti-strike crowd and the pickets start chanting in unison, 'Miller's got to go'

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To borrow from W.C. Fields, it was not a day of effulgent sunshine for David Miller.

The new issue of Maclean's hit the newsstand, showing the mayor in a garbage can with a banana peel on his head. Cover line: Toronto stinks. Demonstrators outside City Hall called for his resignation.

Hopes that his public offer of settlement would end the strike by 30,000 city workers expired with a dying gasp. Friday marked a week since the offer, and the mayor's gambit has clearly failed to move the striking unions.

So it was a tense and testy-looking mayor who went before the media to say that he was feeling "extremely frustrated at the pace of negotiations."

Torontonians know the feeling. The strike has been on for nearly four weeks with no end in sight. How did this happen? How will it end? Is anyone in control? Those are the kinds of thoughts that people in the city are having as the strike threatens to stretch right through the summer.

Mr. Miller finds himself in a tough spot. By rights, he should be winning this strike hands down. Public opinion is hostile to the strikers, whose insistence on keeping generous sick benefits seems out of step at a time when so many workers are barely hanging on to their jobs.

The city's offer – a 7.2-per-cent raise over four years, a partial payout of workers' banked sick days, an agreement not to claw back any other major rights or benefits – is fair and reasonable. Yet a couple of recent polls show that people are blaming the mayor almost as much as the unions for the strike.

The cheeky Maclean's cover nicely summed up a feeling that the city is becoming dysfunctional, a sentiment that can only increase when a strike disrupts basic services. Fairly or not, a lot of that discontent is going to stick to the mayor.

The scene outside City Hall Friday afternoon told the story. A group of about 50 anti-strike protesters from a downtown business group marched around waving placards about how the strikers should get back to work. Union pickets carrying their own strike placards looked on sullenly, but when the anti-strike crowd started chanting "Miller's got to go," the pickets cheered up and chimed in. For a few minutes, they chanted together, in perfect accord on that one point.

That is the mayor's problem. By holding firm against the unions, he risks alienating his base of support in the labour unions and other "progressive" corners of the city. Yet he is not winning any credit from the right. His right-wing opponents on council are positively slavering at this golden chance to bring him low, even though they may actually back his insistence on holding the line in the strike.

Meanwhile, the great mushy middle is simply angry and confused. Mr. Miller did a poor job of preparing the city for this confrontation. In the weeks before the strike, the big issues were five-cent plastic bags, green roofs, bike lanes on Jarvis Street and streetcar funding, not the city's budget crisis. So the strike seemed to come out of a clear blue sky.

How does the mayor get out of this trap? He could ask the province to step in, but Premier Dalton McGuinty has shown no willingness to do so. In any case, a back-to-work order would mean a costly arbitrated settlement.

He could compromise, but giving in to the unions and dropping his demand for an end to the bankable sick-leave benefit after making such an issue of it would be political suicide. He could get tough, but bringing in private contractors to clear up the garbage would anger the unions and could make a settlement even harder.

A tough spot indeed. "What effulgent sunshine," said the inimitable W.C. "It was a day of this sort the McGillicuddy brothers murdered their mother with an axe."