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Toronto on strike: David Miller warns of possible layoffs if union doesn't bend

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By Allison Hanes, National Post

Mayor David Miller warned yesterday that possible layoffs and service cuts would be the price of yielding to demands by striking Toronto workers, in yet another recalibrating of the city's message about what is at stake in the month-long labour dispute.

Pay raises for 30,000 indoor and outdoor civic employees on par with those doled out in arbitrated settlements to police and transit unions "would cost the city tens of millions of dollars in 2010 that we simply don't have," Mr. Miller told the National Post yesterday. "And that would be mean service cuts, possibly layoffs, certainly not hiring people. So you get this real inequity where older workers don't get a raise, younger workers won't have a job.

"Same thing with the sick bank. It's great for the older workers, not as great for the young ones. I can't support that as Mayor. It's wrong."

Two weeks ago, Mr. Miller publicly revealed the city's offer to Canadian Union of Public Employees Locals 79 and 416: 7.2% over four years, plus a reformed sick leave plan. The Mayor said talks intensified slightly after the city's offer was revealed, but negotiators for both the union and the city are still talking around the edges of the contract and need to get down to "the heart of it."

While he wouldn't reveal the city's hand, he did indicate he and his advisors haven't played their final card yet in terms of jolting the labour disruption to a conclusion.

"We're pursuing other strategies," Mr. Miller said. "Going public was I think the right thing to do and if we need to take other steps we will."

Mr. Miller said he remains positive about progress at the negotiating table, as Toronto entered its fifth week of a civic strike yesterday.

"I feel slightly more optimistic, but every time I feel that, the talks seem to go the other way," he conceded. "But they are ongoing."

The Mayor said 2009 and 2010 are crucial budget years for the city, with a recession cutting into revenue, the welfare caseload soaring and the "upload" of services to the province only beginning to be phased in.

For a Mayor who was elected as being a friend to the unions, Mr. Miller's tone has been hardening as the strike



wears on. He has begun focusing on the spectre of job cuts and the need to preserve the futures of young workers, in addition to earlier messages about Toronto seeking a contract that is both fair and affordable.

Although his labour-friendly reputation may have taken a hit as the strike has worn on, he said he remains “calm” in the face of the storm.

“I’m personally very comfortable with what our city has been proposing. It’s fair and it’s in the best interest of the workers. Because I’m confident in that position and I know what the instructions are and I know they are reasonable. For me I’ve been very calm. I very much regret that we’re not able to provide the city services in this strike that’s affecting the most vulnerable in the city, you know the children, people on welfare can’t get anything but the most basic social assistance cheques. I really regret that. But I think our position throughout has been one that’s about a positive future about public service and that’s what public sector trade unions should be all about.”

The city’s offer proposes wage hikes of 7.2% compounded over four years – 1%, 1%, 2% and 3% – as well as pay-outs of banked sick time and the institution of a new sick leave plan in its place. The union, meanwhile, is holding out for salary hikes of at least 3% a year and wants workers to continue to be able to bank up to 18 sick days annually to cash out at the end of their careers.

Said Mr. Miller: “We tried in this round of collective bargaining to modernize our collective agreement so that we can keep people working in a recession – that has to be Number 1 – and so we can keep public services public by running them efficiently and effectively,” the Mayor said. “I think that’s a goal a union should share because it’s their members’ jobs that you want to keep public. That’s really what our position’s been all along and maybe that’s a tough position for these particular locals to accept but that’s what our position’s been about: being efficient, effective and affordable.”