

## The iconic nature of 18 sick days

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Nobody was returning my calls at City Hall today, so I wandered over to Yonge Dundas Square -- where a perky television personality MCed a contest to pick an official Toronto song -- and asked the first banker I met for his opinion on the looming strike by 24,000 unionized City of Toronto employees.

“They’re not prepared to compromise on any of their benefits, which in today’s environment I think is very short-sighted,” said Tony Porco. “I have no sympathy for the employees. The reality is that times have changed. You have to be flexible. What are they going to do: hold a gun to the head of the general public and raise taxes again for some garbage workers?”

Three lovely young women stood in cowboy boots, black T-shirts that read, “I feel adventurous” and red bandanas, promoting Tourism Alberta. They were more chivalrous to the city workers, even when I explained the crux of the labour dispute: that city employees want to protect their 18 sick days a year, which they can cash in at retirement for a windfall of up to six months’ pay.

“I think it’s perfectly reasonable for them to want to save that,” said Kathleen Wonch.

But Meghan Borisko noted, “At my job I was only allowed seven sick days a year.” Even that job she lost because the company “went south” -- which explains why she’s standing in the square in a cowboy outfit.

The sick benefits perk that our garbage collectors, lawn mower operators and dog catchers enjoy certainly does seem rather generous in these troubled times. But it is hardly new. Councillor Howard Moscoe (Eglinton-Lawrence) notes, “most municipalities have it and most school boards have it. When I retired as a school teacher I got it. I’ve been in politics for 31 years and it has always been part of the landscape.”

That may be so, says Dwayne Benjamin, an economics professor at the University of Toronto, “but it doesn’t make it unreasonable to say that it’s a bit rich.”

Mr. Benjamin notes that Canadians are sick about 3% of the time, which on a year of 200 workdays, say, means they’re out an average of six days. The city’s benefits package grew over the years as politicians sought to placate labour while making it appear they were keeping wages in check.

“Politically it’s easier for the management side to raise benefits than to raise wages,” he explained. “The city only worries about how much people squawk about it.”

The problem, of course, is that we can’t afford these deals anymore, which is the particular corner into which Mayor David Miller, and the leaders before him, have painted themselves.

Councillor Doug Holyday (Etobicoke Centre) recalls how he did away with sick-day accumulation in 1995, as mayor of Etobicoke.

“First we contracted out the garbage. Then we used a pension fund windfall to buy out the sick plan from our employees, which was easier to do when they didn’t have a garbage strike to hold over our heads.”

The city then signed a contract with a private collection firm that had first signed a labour agreement with a union, matching the length of the contract. That way, there can never be a garbage strike, he said.

Private garbage collection endures in Etobicoke, which is why the sweet smell of June will endure there, even if a garbage strike engulfs the rest of the city after Monday’s strike deadline. This detail is not lost on Mr. Benjamin, who himself lives in Etobicoke.

“I will get my garbage collected,” he said. “Speaking as an economist, there are so many things that ought to be contracted out instead of having one big giant union that can run things.”