



Garbage strike doom and gloom

The public's fuming about city workers who are just fighting for the same rights everyone else wants

Mike Smith

Though Toronto may have a reputation for leaning left, popular reaction to labour unrest here tends to be gauche.

When a slim majority of TTC workers voted to strike last year, the reaction – at least the one we saw on the news – was a kind of confused hatred.

And now, as Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 79 and Toronto Civic Employees Union Local 416 (representing indoor and outdoor city staff) signal a standstill in negotiations, a Monday strike deadline looms and newspaper comment boxes overflow with vitriol like unattended garbage bins.

“Who do these people think they are, expecting special treatment?” goes the sentiment. “In the middle of a recession? And when we have to work so hard?”

As public staff, they're oddly both fellow workers and employees of the average Torontonian. But beyond that, it's been a long while since the language of solidarity among working schmoes fired up the public imagination. Of course, the city, unlike private-sector employers, doesn't have profits to dip into or the clout to seek a recession bailout.

“The city is looking for the flexibility it needs to continue to deliver,” Kevin Sack of the strategic communications division told me when the possibility of a strike first arose two weeks ago. “The

number of employees is such that we need set conditions of employment to allow management to be efficient.”

“Flexibility” is such a nice word. It evokes yoga classes. But in our economic context it should ring warning bells, suggesting not so much downward dog as downward spiral.

The city’s position makes sense – but the bendability can’t be on all one side.

“‘Flexibility’ is code for deteriorating workers’ rights,” says Local 416 president Mark Ferguson. While the issue of workers banking their allotted 18 sick days a year and turning them into cash on retirement is the one making press, Ferguson’s explanation suggests it’s become a metaphor for a larger contest over just what it means to be employed.

Also on the table, according to Ferguson, are shift scheduling practices (“the employer would be able to change hours of work at their whim,”) protection against layoffs and how to deal with seniority.

The latter seems to be an especially sore point. When it comes time to let seasonal staff go until next year, the tradition is that younger staff move on while senior staff get first crack at other shifts. The city no longer wants to be limited by that habit.

Then there’s the fact that the union is worried about the city’s response to attrition due to retirement: more contract work.

“[Jobs are] being contracted out at an increasing rate,” says Ferguson.

Rather than hiring more temps, says the union, the city should prioritize the creation of permanent positions and apprenticeships for newcomers and at-risk youth. The union doesn’t want to keep the workforce old, it seems. It wants young workers to know they’ll have a job 15 years down the road.

Maybe the idea of lifelong employment has simply become quaint, but what will replace it is still up for grabs. Should the unions win, it could set a precedent for those in the private sector whose turmoil has only begun.

“I’m not sure I buy into the idea that these times require concessions,” says Ferguson. “This is a crisis largely driven by the banks and bad credit, and I find it disingenuous that the city would ask its employees to bear the brunt of an economic situation not of their making.”

Certainly, a lot of other employees out there are thinking the same thing. One has to wonder: are complaints about civic workers expressions of outrage or just jealousy of workers who still have the power to stand up for themselves?

As if such a thing has become unthinkable.

news@nowtoronto.com

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