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Marcus Gee

The odds are in his favour – now Miller needs to stick to his guns

Mayor's dreams for Toronto hang in the balance

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The gods are seldom so kind. This week's strike by city workers is a heaven-sent opportunity for Mayor David Miller.

With an election coming next year, his rivals are preparing to paint him as a union-loving, bike-peddling, tax-and-spend downtown lefty out of touch with average Tim Hortons Torontonians.

Here is his chance to prove them wrong. If Mr. Miller can stand up to the unions and win concessions that save the city money in the teeth of a recession, no one will ever be able to say he is a union lapdog or spineless slave of political correctness.

Winning this strike would devastate the right wing, all but assuring Mr. Miller a third term when he faces voters in November, 2010. All he needs to do is stick to his guns.

The odds in this showdown are strongly in his favour. The city, indeed the world, has entered an era of austerity. Everyone is cutting back, hunkering down, making do with less.

Thousands of people in the city have lost their jobs and countless more are hanging on by their fingernails.

Now along comes a strike dedicated to preserving disco-era benefits like 18 days of annual, bankable sick leave. E-mail baskets, call-in shows and letters to the editor are bubbling with outrage at the gall of the city unions.

In baseball, they would call this a big fat pitch. For Mr. Miller, it hangs over home plate like a harvest moon, just begging to be smacked out of the park. Will he swing?

The very idea probably turns the mayor's stomach. He is the furthest thing from a union basher. A long-time NDPer who gave up his party card only in 2007, he has made a point of cultivating good relations with city employees. On top of that, he is a decent guy who doesn't like to bash anyone if he can help it.

But this is not bashing. It's simple realism. As Mr. Miller put it yesterday: "Unfortunately, the world has changed. There is a worldwide recession." At a time when the city's tax take is down and its welfare rolls are growing, it can't afford to have liabilities like the sick-leave bank hanging over city hall. It's an irrefutable argument.

If he makes it with force and eloquence – and he will have to dial it up several notches to make it stick – there is every chance that he will emerge from this confrontation as a big winner. Other NDPers have managed it. Saskatchewan premier Roy Romanow closed rural hospitals to get the province's books in order. Tommy Douglas ran back-to-back balanced budgets in Saskatchewan (and Mr. Miller hung the sainted Tommy's picture on his office wall). Both were political champions.

It's good politics for leftish leaders to show they can be left in charge of the till. Imagine the headlines for Mr. Miller: the lefty mayor who faced down big labour.

It is not just Mr. Miller's political fate that is at stake. His dreams for the city hang in the balance. He is an ambitious mayor with grand plans for waterfront renewal, transit expansion, better housing and a cleaner environment. All this costs money, and the money is drying up.

After two recent taxes increases (on land transfers and vehicle registration), he has run out of room for more. The right would tar and feather him if he tried another and voters would run him out of town on a rail. Provincial and federal money has run out, too. The feds have given cities a share of the gasoline tax and dedicated hundreds of millions to Toronto transit. The province is uploading social services and saving the city a fortune. Now, suddenly, both levels of government are running staggering deficits. Toronto is on its own.

If Mr. Miller wants to fulfill his costly dreams, he has to save money on other things, like labour costs. And if he wants to do that, he needs to win this strike.

It may sound twisted to say it, but a global recession and tone-deaf unions have furnished him with the ideal ammunition. If he can find the nerve to use it, both he and the city can come out ahead.