

What's at stake in city strike: A CUPE view

The city is following the corporate pack that is taking its financial troubles out on older workers

Jun 24, 2009 04:30 AM

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MARK BLINCH/REUTERS

Our members – child-care workers, paramedics, social service workers, building inspectors, garbage collectors and thousands more who keep our city safe, clean and beautiful – have been forced to embark on a strike that we had hoped to avoid.

Toronto garbage collectors, daycare workers and other municipal employees went on strike just after midnight on Monday in a contract dispute that could lead to a prolonged shutdown of important services.

We deliberately went into these negotiations with few proposals in recognition of the current economic situation.

But we also knew that all other unionized workers providing services to the people of this city had achieved new contracts in line with most other municipalities in Ontario.

Much of the reporting on our negotiations has focused on the sick plan and sick bank that have existed in the city for decades.

But the city's concession demands go way beyond sick days to gutting our contracts of basic collective agreement rights.

We have resisted talking publicly about detailed proposals because we do not believe negotiating in the media helps the bargaining process.

However, having received what can only be described as a strike-provoking proposal last Sunday night, we think it is important for the public to know the real impact of the city's concession demands.

The City of Toronto – like so many other employers who see this recession as a way to weasel out of contract obligations – has launched an attack on older workers.

The average age of the people who keep your water safe and your parks clean is 50.

The city has been happy over the years to retain career employees with the promise of benefits that will help them in their later years, when they are more susceptible to illness and injury.

And our members have been happy to do it because they are proud to work for the people of Toronto.

But now, when the likelihood of having to live up to that promise looms larger, the city wants to strip it all away.

If the city gets its way, the sick bank will be gone.

Benefits for workers aged 65 will be reduced and will disappear altogether when they reach age 70.

These take-aways are like a slap in the face to loyal, dedicated employees who went eight years with no increase during the recession of the 1990s, who worked and fell ill during the SARS and legionnaires' disease outbreaks, who reach their older years with bodies broken from hard physical labour.

To add insult to injury, no benefits were stripped away from other city workers who renewed collective agreements at Toronto Community Housing, Toronto Parking Authority, Police Services, Toronto Fire, Toronto Hydro and Enwave well after the economic downturn began.

Mayor David Miller and Toronto City Council are following the corporate pack that is taking its financial troubles out on older workers and doing everything they can to lower expectations for a new generation – the first whose standard of living is likely to be worse than the one enjoyed by their parents.

We know that a strike has a serious impact on the people of Toronto – as it does on our members. But it's not our job to win the race to the bottom.

If workers who have the strength of a union on their side start losing all the gains that have been made over decades, the future looks grim for everyone.