

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

The strike offers a rare opportunity to make fundamental changes to how we run our city

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Nothing says not working like a strike. On the other hand, the folks involved in the blame game seem well employed. Working overtime in the business of finger pointing has its benefits.

Some have cast the latest labour dispute as a problem between management and staff in the civil service. Others want to blame the mayor but not council; others want the unions held responsible but not politicians. Nobody says it out loud, but how about those taxpayers who always demand the impossible: better service without paying for it?

The recession has provided elected officials all over the globe with a rare opportunity to create change. In fact, the public is demanding it. Unlike the climate crisis or the housing crisis, the economic crisis is creating amazing momentum and consensus. Sadly, many at city hall are still studying the problem and looking to the past to start fights. Ideology is in great supply but new ideas are scarce.

Let's take the sick pay issue. What started out as an incentive to get workers to book off less in exchange for deferred pay – effectively a bonus for showing up – has morphed into an entitlement for the union and a financial liability for the city.

The recession has raised the stakes for everyone. The collapse of the stock market has seen the savings of workers shrink as they head into retirement. Social service demands created by unemployment have jacked up the city's budget costs as we respond to people's needs. Now a work stoppage at city hall has kicked in just as more and more people turn to government for help. The system is failing.

But the system has been failing for some time: our labour agreements have been built up over a century, as have our methods of operating as a council. Service delivery isn't much different: water still runs through underground pipes; garbage is picked up at the curb side; and you still have to go to city hall for a permit to exercise your property rights.

What this strike presents all of us with is a rare opportunity to make fundamental changes to how we run and create our city. Changing the mayor, changing the collective agreement, changing ward boundaries or the size of your garbage bin are all ideas, some better than others, but the change that is needed is far more fundamental, and it's time everyone at city hall got to work.

City residents are way out in front of us on this one. Whether it's the innovative programming at Dufferin Grove Park, where park users program the park, or Pedestrian Sundays in Kensington Market, where residents run the festival. Whether it's Luminato taking over Dundas Square or the mobile computer lab started by a teacher in Jane Finch for young people, or the initiation of a neighbourhood camera club in Lawrence Heights, the reality is that citizens, neighbours, residents and folks just visiting the city are prepared to bring solutions forward instead of just complaining about the problems.

Yes, the garbage will still need to be picked up, the water will still have to run through underground pipes and the fire trucks and ambulances will still need to arrive in an emergency. But those are called the basics for a reason. What we need to incentivize is not the act of showing up, we need to encourage innovation, and this round of labour talks is either going to tackle the problems of the future or stew in the miseries of the past.

Until we rethink what local government is for, restructure how it should work and find a new way forward, we'll just find ourselves around the table shouting at each other instead of finding a way to build a better city.