



Bad timing has caused strike

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With strong words of condemnation for city negotiators, union officials dismissed final contract offers as "complete garbage" and plunged the city into a strike just after midnight.

The offer was "a vicious attack on our membership," said Mark Ferguson, head of the outside workers, Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 416.

His CUPE colleague from Local 79, representing the inside workers, said the city never wanted to settle and is hell-bent on treating these workers different from police, fire, hydro and community housing employees.

Some 57 city-run daycare centres won't open this morning, and parents must scramble to find alternatives. School kids, soon to be out on summer vacation, are to be robbed of day camps, swimming pools and recreation programs. And the stench will soon assault our nostrils as the garbage piles up.

That's what happens when 30,000 civic workers are on strike.

How did we get into this mess when Toronto reportedly has a union-coddling mayor? Bad timing.

Through six months of contract talks between City of Toronto and two of its larger civic unions, the workers seemed well-positioned. They had a friend of unions in Mayor David Miller. Certainly, he would not trigger a strike the way Mel Lastman did in 2002 by branding the workers as seeking "jobs for life."

More importantly, unions representing police, fire, hydro and TTC had managed to get wage hikes of around 3 per cent without giving up concessions on benefits.

Fairness would suggest the inside and outside workers — sanitary workers, inspectors, recreation and parks workers, welfare case workers, day-care providers, planners and the like — could expect the same.

But by 5 p.m. yesterday, seven hours before the strike deadline, it became clear a major shift beneath the feet of Local 416 and Local 79 was now complete.

Their timing has been atrocious. They're seeking a new contract at the worst economic time in a decade. And the friend in the mayor's office is in search of an image makeover — one that presents him as a defender of the public purse.

The unions could either roll over or fight. They chose to fight. A strike was inevitable.

The first sign of desperation came at 10.30 Sunday morning when Ferguson, negotiating his first contract as head of Local 416, told reporters "the city's approach hasn't changed in six months. Concessions are still on the table. They're pushing us towards a strike."

Sabre-rattling, maybe. But then Ann Dembinski, the low-keyed leader of Local 79, the inside workers that handle permits and day-care and social services, excoriated the mayor and the city for "stubborn unwillingness to remove concessions. We have no alternative but to defend our members."

City officials, especially spokesman Kevin Sack, is "all sweetness and light" at news conferences, "but at the negotiating table, the city is putting the knife to us. . . We are being pushed by mayor and city council in a position where we are left with no other position but to defend ourselves.

"This is about getting a fair deal similar to what everyone else got. No other city workers had to negotiate huge concessions," she said. Workers with the "Toronto community housing last month went on the same sick plan" the city wants to wrench away from the striking workers.

"We deserve the same collective agreement as every other workers. The mayor is using the recession as an excuse to rip our collective agreement into pieces. . . On those issues we've never been close and we're not remotely close now."

Dembinski's frustration may have played well. But it came late, too long after weeks of playing up the sick-pay issue that is a clear loser with the public.

In fact, Miller's shift in position was evident 11 weeks ago. He froze his own salary but refused to push city council to do the same. Worse, he argued strongly that \$96,805 they made wasn't enough and gave them \$99,153. Shortly after he froze the salaries of non-unionized workers, cementing his hypocrisy. And now, he's targeted the lowest paid of the civic workers.

Miller cites the recession. But it's a tough sell for workers who just 11 weeks ago saw little evidence of spending constraints in a recession budget.

So they strike, hoping the province legislates them back to work quickly. But the timing may be off here as well. City of Windsor civic workers have been on strike — for 10 weeks and counting — without provincial intervention.