



Expect long, drawn-out fight

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MARK BLINCH/REUTERS

Canadian Union of Public Employees members picket City Hall June 22, 2009 after going on strike just after midnight.

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Expect the civic workers' strike to last well into next month and beyond.

Even before the first picket lines were erected early yesterday, business lobbyists were urging the province to legislate the employees back to work. Wishful thinking.

Mayor David Miller says he's optimistic of a settlement because the unions didn't walk away from the negotiations vowing to return only if their demands are met. City manager Joe Pennachetti yesterday said he expects the dispute will end "fairly soon ... this week." Double wishful thinking.

Mark Ferguson, head of Local 416, representing the outside workers, is wooing the public. "This will be an unpopular fight, but it is a necessary fight," he said. He's right about "unpopular." He'd better be right about "necessary." Together, the mixture suggests unionized workers had better gird themselves for a protracted battle.

The politics around the issue is bad. The economy is ailing. Public sentiment falls short of accommodating. Striking workers feel unfairly targeted. And expect citizen and worker frustration to mount as the garbage piles up.

For one, both sides are miles apart in contract talks. Someone has to cave. But when both sides decide to strike rather than negotiate it means the differences are real and entrenched. Backing down, and doing so after only a short time on strike, would leave the loser open to ridicule.

There are four players in the strike drama that help determine how long the conflict drags on: the city, the union, the public and the province.

First the city. Pennachetti's optimistic outlook yesterday is at odds with reality. If a deal is there to be made before this week ends, why wasn't it tabled over the past six months? If the city is going to fold, it would be folly to do so after just one week of unrest.

Miller maintains the world has changed since last fall when other civic employees got their contract with provisions the inside and outside workers now insist on keeping. But community housing workers got their deal this spring.

Ferguson described the city's latest offer as "complete garbage ... a vicious, unwarranted attack on the union." Ann Dembinski of Local 79 insists the city must remove concessions on sick pay benefits before talks can flourish. Both argue that police, fire, Hydro and community housing employees all negotiated the kind of deal they want. Why should they be the lone union to shoulder the recessionary burden?

The strikers like their chances if the issue is sent to mediation.

Public opinion may decide how soon the strike ends. Both sides have helped and harmed their case.

If, as Miller says, the world has changed, why did he not act like it during the city's budget debate? Why give city councillors – who already made more than \$96,000 – a 2.42 per cent pay hike, ignoring warnings it would be a bad precedent.

Still, his "recession" argument resonates.

The union loses credibility when focusing on the details of sick pay. They gain sympathy when they argue they are the only ones being asked to take a hit.

Queen's Park will likely have to legislate a settlement, after gauging public outcry. The Liberal government has not intervened as Windsor city workers struggle through 10 weeks of strike. How can they jump into the Toronto dispute after a week or two?

In 2002, Ontario legislated Toronto unions back to work. That was a Conservative government. A million Catholic youths were coming to see the Pope. The politics was different.

The unions want a reprise. Rarely do they decry a mediated settlement.

Royson James usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

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