

## Sick pay dicey issue for walkout

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If Toronto civic workers strike to protect long-held sick-pay benefits that most other employees don't have or relinquished long ago, their unions are pursuing a risky strategy.

Many issues, including a salary freeze, remain on the bargaining table as Local 79 and Local 416 talk with the city's negotiators to avert a strike early Monday. But the unions have decided to focus on the sick-pay issue. It's not a winner – not with the average citizen.

Toronto city workers have no short-term disability plan to protect them in the case of illness. Many unionized workers do. You get sick, you are covered up to 100 per cent of your pay, before long-term disability kicks in.

Toronto has an alternate plan, with good and bad points. Workers are entitled to 18 sick days a year. But if they don't take the days – seen by the union as an incentive to not book off sick – they get to bank the days at the end of the year. Over time, the days accumulate. And at retirement, the worker can cash in a maximum of 120 days, or six months' pay.

The benefit made sense before the advent of short-term disability plans. Now, most jurisdictions, public and private, have abandoned the practice. Toronto wants its workers to do the same, for some good reasons.

The city auditor has been flagging the current practice as a problem. One auditor report says Toronto would have to pay out \$249 million, if all the workers cashed in. Toronto has a \$63 million reserve fund for this, leaving \$186 million unfunded as of 2007.

That kind of liability can frighten even a left-leaning, union-loving mayor and council. And it infuriates most citizens. So it is a dubious strategy to use this matter as the principle on which to stage job action.

Effective March 2008, non-unionized city staff were given a short-term disability plan to replace the sick-pay plan. So they have already shown the way. That plan grandfathered workers with more than 10 years of service so they can cash in sick benefits already earned. But no more.

So, if city negotiators are offering a similar plan – and that is not clear as we don't know where exactly both sides will settle as opening positions morph into final offers – there is no reasonable course of strike action on this issue.

Councillor Doug Holyday, who eliminated the sick-bank plan when he was mayor of the old city of Etobicoke, calls it "a bonus for coming to work." Holyday's views are not mainstream. But his sentiments ring true with most citizens.

The city auditor last year concluded a review of how city managers supervised the average worker's claim of sick time and was quite critical. He conducted the review after getting calls to the city's fraud hotline – calls from fellow workers who complained that sick days were being exploited, that workers were improperly using banked days as they approached retirement, even when they were not legitimately ill.

Apparently, some long-time workers have more banked sick days than the 120 maximum they will be paid for. So, they book off sick.

Legends are then spun about city workers who book off sick for six months to lower excess banked sick days beyond the 120, then being paid an extra six months salary for the allowed banked sick days – all leading to retirement.

This feeds perception that civic workers have cushy jobs and need to be reined in. There will be little sympathy for civic workers who strike to protect a benefit viewed as a relic of the past.

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