

Time to roll back council pay raise

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In lamenting the municipal employees' strike now disrupting Toronto, Mayor David Miller correctly argues that public sector unions shouldn't expect pay raises and concession-free contracts when private sector workers – and taxpayers – are facing layoffs, plant closings, and rollbacks of their pay and benefits.

"The world has changed," Miller said in a radio interview yesterday. "We're simply not in a position to offer generous settlements at a time of worldwide recession, when our tax revenues are significantly down and our costs are significantly up."

Regrettably, Miller and his hand-picked executive committee undermined that sound argument earlier this year in allowing city councillors to pocket a 2.4 per cent raise, boosting their annual salaries from \$96,805 to \$99,153. Few would disagree now that this was a mistake. It can, and should, be corrected.

No labour leader is eager to accept concessions. The workers who elect them don't pay union dues in order to move backward. So it is hardly surprising that the leaders of two striking locals of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, representing 30,000 inside and outside city workers, are vigorously defending their existing benefits, including 18 sick days a year that can be banked and cashed out at retirement. The union is also insisting on a wage settlement close to the 3 per cent annual hike given to transit workers and police last year.

Those contracts were both imposed through arbitration, however, and they came before the economy's deep downturn became apparent. There are no such excuses for city council's ill-judged 2.4 per cent pay increase, which came earlier this year, after the economy had already begun its precipitous decline. The pay raise represents a failure of Miller's leadership.

To be sure, Miller himself declined to accept the raise, but he didn't seek to impose the same restraint on the rest of council. That oversight is now providing ammunition to the union leaders, who insist their members are being unfairly singled out for austerity measures.

As a sign of good faith and as a symbol of sacrifice in hard times, Toronto city council should now move to roll back its pay hike.

All council and committee meetings have been cancelled for the duration of the strike, but the mayor has the power to gather councillors on 24-hours' notice. He should not hesitate to do so for the specific purpose of rolling back the councillors' pay raise.

If Miller fails to rise to the challenge, a special council meeting could also be triggered by a petition signed by a majority of councillors.

It would be illuminating to see which councillors insist on keeping their raise in the face of a summer strike that has left families with no daycare, children with no swimming pools, and homeowners with no place to put their garbage.

When the pay raise was initially debated months ago, some councillors noted that it only amounts to about \$45 a week, and they pointed out that it was picayune compared to the city's \$8.7 billion budget.

That's true. But even a modest raise reeks of hypocrisy when others are being asked to accept freezes or cutbacks. There is little doubt the councillors' pay raise has fed the workers' anger and bolstered their determination to strike. Roll it back.