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## **Public must be strong in a strike**

By SUN MEDIA

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Many Torontonians will be understandably furious if city workers go on strike this week.

But the reality is the unions representing those workers will be counting on that fury to work in their favour.

That's because as public anger over losing garbage collection and other services such as daycare, summer day camps, swimming pools, community centres, permit-issuing and the Island ferry grows, it puts more pressure on the city than the unions to settle.

Taxpayers know they can't influence unions. But when hundreds start phoning the mayor and councillors demanding, in so many words: "I don't care how you settle this strike, just settle it!", it puts pressure on the city to capitulate.

The problem is this time there's too much at stake for easy solutions like emergency back-to-work legislation by the province and handing all outstanding issues to an arbitrator.

That's because arbitrators typically side with the union -- particularly when it comes to taking anything out of an existing contract -- and don't factor in the public's ability to pay, even in a recession.

If Mayor David Miller and council are serious about getting Toronto's finances under control -- and admittedly, it's a big "if" given that all the politicians with real power at City Hall are pro-union -- they're going to have to toughen up.

So are the rest of us.

At a time when cities across North America are laying off workers to rein in costs because of the recession, no one with any influence at Toronto City Hall is proposing such draconian measures.

This makes union allegations the city is trying to gut their labour contracts using the economic downturn as an excuse, absurd.

In reality, city workers have job security, pensions and other benefits about which most workers, particularly in the private sector, can only dream.

One of those benefits, their ability to bank up to 130 days of unused sick time -- workers get 18 sick days a year -- for a cash "gratuity" upon retirement, is blowing a hole in the city's budget every year, including an unfunded liability of about \$186 million.

Certainly, city workers deserve sick time -- for when they're sick. But banking and cashing unused sick time is an expensive, outdated perk which municipalities all over the Greater Toronto Area have eliminated.

It's past time Toronto at least made a start in doing the same.

Long civic strikes cause serious inconvenience to the public. But given what's at stake, they may be a necessity.

Windsor, for example, hit by the double whammy of the recession and auto industry downsizing, is

suffering through a nine-week civic workers' strike -- and counting.

If there's a strike, we hope it won't take that long for Toronto's civic workers to come to their senses.

But if it does, so be it. Because taxpayers can't afford what City Hall is costing them anymore.