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No back-to-work legislation yet: McGuinty

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You can hold your nose but don't hold your breath.

The province won't immediately act to order striking Toronto city workers -- including garbage collectors -- back onto the job, with the Liberal government of Premier Dalton McGuinty preferring the two sides reach a deal themselves.

"We respect the collective bargaining process and believe the best solution is one reached by both parties through negotiations," McGuinty spokesman Karman Wong said yesterday.

"We have a provincial mediator at the negotiating table to help in whatever way we can, and remain hopeful that both sides continue to talk and work together to find a solution."

If the Grits' patience fails, it won't be for the first time. Twice already in just over a year the Liberals have called MPPs back to Queen's Park for emergency sessions ordering workers back to the job -- a two-day strike by TTC workers in April 2008 and then the 75-day strike by non-tenure faculty at York University in January.

About 24,000 workers from both the city's inside and outside workers went on strike yesterday. They say the city is trying to use the economic downturn to pry away benefits such as accumulated sick time they worked hard over the years to win.

The city counters its costs are escalating because of the recession at the same time as its tax base is declining.

The last time Toronto faced such a strike, the Progressive Conservative government of then-premier Ernie Eves waited almost two weeks before passing legislation forcing the unions back to work.

"You don't want to deprive somebody of their rights that they have obtained under legislation in the province of Ontario," Eves said at the time, shortly after the strike began. "But on the other hand, I don't think you can allow that to compromise human health and safety."

Eves eventually did opt for back-to-work legislation, after massive piles of garbage prompted the province's medical officer of health to warn of potential health risks.

Yesterday, the Canadian Restaurant and Food Safety Association urged quick action, pointing to a 10-week garbage strike in Windsor as an example of what not to do.

"What kind of image will we present to tourists visiting Toronto if they are faced with garbage piling up on city streets, rampant rodent infestations, and the like?" CRFA president Garth Whyte wrote in an open letter.

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