

Is that a union donation in your councillor's pocket ...

Or would you be glad to see an end to big-money contributions for municipal politicians?

By BRYN WEESE, SUN MEDIA

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Seven city councillors accepted more than \$4,000 combined in campaign donations from the city's two striking unions during the last municipal election.

CUPE Locals 79 and 416, which represent the 24,000 inside and outside workers who walked off the job six days ago and are fighting for better wages and to keep their benefits, gave \$200 and \$500 respectively to Councillors Maria Augimeri, Anthony Perruzza, Adam Giambone, Janet Davis, and council's budget chief Shelley Carroll.

CUPE 4400, which represents workers at the Toronto District School Board, also gave \$750 donations to Carroll, Davis, Perruzza and Giambone.

Local 79 also gave \$200 donations to Councillor Glenn De Baeremaeker and council speaker Sandra Bussin.

According to some of their critics, those donations -- albeit small -- are enough to question their actions during the strike.

But many of those councillors have not been working in City Hall this past week during the strike.

"These are our employees, for whom we have to make major decisions concerning their wages, their benefits and their working conditions," said Councillor Doug Holyday, who didn't accept any union donations in 2006. "I think it's totally improper that councillors be influenced in this way ... Those union donations aren't proper."

And while most critics of corporate and union donations admit a few hundred dollars can't buy a vote on council, it can buy some influence, according to at least two other councillors who want the practice scrapped.

"At a minimum, it's the perception of influence," Councillor Michael Walker said. "In reality, it may be greater than that. It may be that your vote is compromised by it.

"We should try and remove, wherever possible, those corrupting influences of big money," he said.

(Walker, and about 10 other councillors -- including Toronto Mayor David Miller -- did not accept any corporate or union donations in the 2006 municipal election.)

The city's elections financial disclosure website tracks all individual, corporate, and union contributions made to every campaign, even losing ones.

According to the website, although the maximum allowable limit for a campaign donation in a municipal election is \$750, Carroll accepted two \$750 donations from the Toronto firefighters' union, and three separate donations from the TTC's union, amounting to \$800.

Records on the website also show Davis, who tied Carroll for the most union donations with 15, accepted \$1,000 from the International Union of Painters.

When asked about the issue of union donations to election campaigns, Davis told the Sun she wasn't the "official" spokesman for the city on the ongoing labour negotiations.

"We're in a labour relations environment right now. No comment," she said.

Carroll, when asked about the \$1,450 she accepted from the Canadian Union of Public Employees last election, said all the election donations are on the website.

"We're not commenting on that stuff right now," she added.

All told, union donations accounted for just over 2% of all 2006 municipal election financing, which is up from 1.1% during the 2003 election.

In fact, across the GTA, Toronto's percentage of union donations is second only to Oshawa, which had 4%.

Walker and councillors Cliff Jenkins and Chin Lee made a move at the city's executive committee in January to have corporate and trade union donations banned from municipal election campaigns.

The committee, which Miller headed, has asked for a draft bylaw doing just that to be brought before them in the fall. The request for the draft bylaw passed 7-4 at committee.

De Baeremaeker, who voted for the bylaw, said he is in favour of banning special-interest donations, even though he accepted 13 union donations in 2006.

"I have voted in favour of ending that practice of corporate and union donations because I think it's the right thing to do," he said, adding they haven't influenced his votes on council.

"I hadn't even thought about it until you mentioned it just now," De Baeremaeker told the Sun, about whether union donations made his job more difficult during the strike.

"That shows you how high it is on my radar screen," he said.

Council will vote in the fall whether to ban corporate and union donations.

If they do, which Walker and Jenkins think is likely given the mayor's support, Toronto will be the first city in Ontario to ban them.

7 COUNCILLORS WHO TOOK CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS FROM STRIKING UNIONS

1. SHELLEY CARROLL city council budget chief, accepted 15 union donations totalling \$7,550 three were from CUPE totalling \$1,450
2. JANET DAVIS accepted 15 union donations totalling \$7,650, three were from CUPE totalling \$1,450
3. MARIA AUGIMERI accepted 13 union donations totalling \$8,350, two from CUPE totalling \$700
4. GLENN DE BAEREMAERKER accepted 13 union donations totalling \$5,900, two from CUPE totalling \$500
5. ANTHONY PERRUZZA accepted 10 union donations totalling \$4,850, three from CUPE totalling \$1,450
6. ADAM GIAMBRONE accepted 10 union donations totalling \$5,450, three from CUPE totalling \$1,450
7. SANDRA BUSSIN council speaker, accepted nine union donations totalling \$5,900, two from CUPE totalling \$500

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