

Miller changes tone on strike

Praises residents

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Mayor David Miller adopted an entirely new tone yesterday, urging an end to an "unnecessary" strike by unionized civic workers while praising Toronto residents for their "remarkable" patience in the face of an extended work stoppage.

On Day 12 of the labour disruption, Mr. Miller sounded as if he had finally struck the right note as leader of a strike-afflicted city, after being criticized earlier for showing a lack of empathy for Torontonians and an amount of sympathy for the picketing workers.

"I want to say to the unions and to the people they represent: Enough is enough. We've made progress at the bargaining table this week and now is the time to end this strike," the Mayor said at an afternoon news conference. "I don't believe any of this was necessary and it's certainly time for it to end."

Mr. Miller also reached out to Toronto residents, expressing particular worry over the plight of children who have been locked out of 57 city-run daycare centres, pools and summer recreation programs for almost two weeks.

He even raised the spectre of refunds for taxpayers, similar to that being proposed in Windsor, Ont., where a months-long civic strike has paralyzed the city.

"We don't know what that will look like, but we'll certainly consider it," Mr. Miller said. "I'm like everyone else, when you pay fees for your kids to use a program that's not provided you expect some consideration. We can't look at that in detail until the strike is over and we assess everything but the basic answer is, yes, that will be considered."

It's a marked departure from the first day of the strike by 24,000 in-door and 6,000 outdoor city workers, when the Mayor opened a briefing by criticizing Toronto residents for illegally dumping trash in parks.

City manager Joe Pennachetti also yesterday attempted to soften the city's message to residents, some of whom have protested over their parks being turned into temporary dumps.

"We want to extend, most importantly, a heartfelt thank you to our residents," he said. "While we have seen instances where patience is being tested, I want to thank the vast majority of our residents and businesses that have shown tremendous civic pride by keeping their neighbourhoods clean and helping the elderly deal with the strike."

Mr. Miller, who is strong believer in labour rights and has enjoyed political support from unions, yesterday put himself squarely on the side of city residents.

"This is awkward for the people of Toronto," he said. "This entire city is held up and we need people working who are supposed to be working and we need the people who are representing them to find a way to say yes."

The presidents of Canadian Union of Public Employees Locals 416 and 79 did not take kindly to the Mayor's ultimatum. "Enough is enough, Mayor Miller? Tell it to your negotiators!" Mark Ferguson and Ann Dembinski said in a statement. "We note that the Mayor dropped any reference to fairness as one of the principles on which he has said a settlement must be forged....The city of Toronto is trying to exact concessions from its direct employees that were never asked of other unionized workers."

The Mayor warned striking workers the city will not ask the province to legislate them back to work, which would then put the fate of the contract in the hands of an arbitrator.

"This strike should be settled, it can be settled, and it will be settled if people recognize the city's financial situation and agree to an affordable contract," he said. "And back-to-work legislation that provides arbitration won't do that."

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