

Earlier discussion

Marcus Gee on the deal

Last updated on Monday, Jul. 27, 2009 02:06PM EDT

After 36 days, the striking City of Toronto outside workers reached a tentative deal that means, among other important details, that Torontonians can look forward to regular garbage collection.

Whether or not the swift removal of the mounds of refuse housed at temporary waste collection sites will remove the stench that has resulted from the often bitter labour dispute remains to be seen.

Join Globe columnist Marcus Gee to discuss the tentative agreement and what it means for the city, the union and Mayor David Miller.

Marcus Gee on the outside workers' deal

12:34

Sasha Nagy: Thanks for joining us today, we are ready to go, questions are arriving and Marcus is just signing in

12:40

[Comment From Gabe]

Marcus, have you heard any details about the deal - in comparison with the City's "final" offer?

12:42

Marcus Gee: Not many. the two sides are playing it close to the vest. Mark Ferguson of the outside workers says that the city has taken all its demands for concessions off the table, but we don't know what he means by that. It's seems incredible that the city would have given up its demand for a change in the banked sick leave policy, which was the major issue in the strike.

12:43

[Comment From TD]

Based on most of the information I have read, the negotiators for the City caved. I understand union rhetoric, but they maintain that they were able to "fight back all the concessions the City sought from the union". If this is indeed the case, this whole exercise seems to have been a colossal waste of time. The Mayor's Office needs to account for and clarify its position

12:43

Sasha Nagy: For those who might need a recap of the day's events, here is a link to our [main news story](#) on globeandmail.com.

we'll try to get to as many questions as possible. Many of you have submitted comments seeking details on the settlement. Typically these details are kept from public scrutiny until a union can present them to their members. We'll try our best to answer them, but if you do not see your question posted, it is not because of neglect, just unable to post repeated questions on the same topic.

Thanks.

12:44

Marcus Gee: It will indeed be astonishing if the city has caved, after more than a month of a strike that was supposed to bring in an affordable deal for the city. We'll see.

12:44

[Comment From Tom]

Do you think Miller or any councillors in particular have suffered enough political damage in this process that there's a good likelihood of change following the 2010 vote?

12:46

Marcus Gee: It's hard to say whether this will stick to Miller or not. The danger for him, especially if he has caved, is that his right wing opponents will cite this as yet more evidence that he is a labour friendly lefty mayor who doesn't keep his eye on the bottom line.

12:46

[Comment From Alex@Willowdale]

Why return to work is scheduled for Thu?

12:46

Marcus Gee: The unions need time to look over and ratify the deal, probably on Wednesday.

12:47

[Comment From Tom McCarten]

If the Globe's comment section is any indication, I think the idea that Toronto's services are delivered via a 19th century union monopoly is coming to an end. This will of course end their political leverage and brinkmanship. Do you think our politicians have the strength to demand that our services be contracted out?

12:48

Marcus Gee: Not under this regime. Mayor Miller has made it clear through the strike that he is still not at all keen of contracting out, competition or any new model of service delivery. It would take a change of mayor to even consider that.

12:49

[Comment From Joe Kelly]

Marcus, In my view the striking unions have done the taxpayers of this city a great service. We can finally have a meaningful debate concerning public sector productivity without arrogant retorts from the Mayor that there is no fat to be trimmed and that such allegations are a "myth". That is the real issue at stake here. 25,000 to 30,000 city employees have been on strike for 6 weeks and the city has not collapsed. Obviously, a lot of people have been inconvenienced. But many of us managed to keep our streets and parks clean and have our garbage properly disposed of --- without breaking a sweat doing it. In fact, in my neighbourhood, we've done a better job of it than the city ever has. So will his honour insist that even a 5% increase in labour productivity is still impossible? We've now all seen otherwise. A 5% decrease in city public sector employment (essential and non-essential) translates into a \$150 to \$180 million annual cost savings. Serious money. I suggest THAT is the debate we should be having.

12:53

Marcus Gee: Good points, Joe. The whole experience has cast an unflattering light on the city and on the efficiency of city services. People are wondering more than ever whether they're getting value for money. They're thinking about whether the public service monopoly really serves the city, given that we've had two strikes in seven years -- this latest one completely unnecessary.

12:54

[Comment From Patricia]

Marcus, do you happen to know the origins of the generous banked sick leave policy? Is it true that it was given to city employees instead of a paycheque increase at some point in the past?

12:55

Sasha Nagy: Here is an audio link from Brodie Fenlon's interview this morning from President of Toronto Civic Employees Union Local 416 CUPE

12:55[Audio file]Brodie_ferguson.mp3 [Play](#)

12:56

Marcus Gee: It goes back decades, Patricia. The original idea was to discourage absenteeism by allowing workers to bank unused sick days. If you didn't take days, you could take them as pay later. But it turned into a sort of entitlement over time and many jurisdictions have done away with it.

12:57

[Comment From Marco]

Do you think a cave-in from the city will have major repercussions come election time?

12:58

Marcus Gee: Huge implications. It would (or should) be the end of Mayor Miller, if we've been through all this only to have the city back off.

12:58

[Comment From W]

How do you feel Miller conducted himself through the strike? What could he have done differently, if anything?

1:01

Marcus Gee:

At first, I felt he was too quiet, hoping as he did that he could reach an agreement behind closed doors. I thought the decision to publish the city's (very reasonable) contract offer was a good move that helped put the unions' feet to the fire. I would have preferred to see him take more decisive steps to keep the city working, though.

1:01

[Comment From Tom McCarten]

Thanks for the comments Marcus, I think it very unfortunate that Council and Miller take that position. I've spent many years in Detroit with a similar model managed by the Teamsters, AFL/CIO. I need not say more except about Detroit but do you think the status quo for Toronto is advisable?

1:02

Marcus Gee: I'd prefer to see more competition in city services. Monopolies are always inefficient.

1:02

[Comment From Khalid Khan]

It was very interesting to see neighbourhoods and communities coming together to ensure the health, safety and maintenance of community property. This was definitely something where citizens can take back some ownership vice leaving it to arrogant and non-caring city workers.

1:04

Marcus Gee: I wouldn't say they are ALL uncaring, but I do think that it was inspiring to see how people pulled together to keep the city working. If that leads to a take-back-the-city attitude, great.

1:04

[Comment From Alex@Willowdale]

Two questions. Did union leadership overplay their hand? As in, failing to consider the long-term impact with voters, who could elect an anti-union mayor as soon as next year. And, will the city promptly refund for services not rendered? I am owed over a thousand dollars, not including inconvenience and aggravation, from camps and swimming lessons paid in advance. It's a big chunk of cash....

1:06

Marcus Gee: The city says that it will offer rebates for lost services such as children's camps -- but not bigger things such as garbage collection.

I agree that the union overplayed its hand, big time, by going on strike over its comfortable benefits at a time when so many people are suffering.

1:07

[Comment From Cathy]

Marcus - Is it a given that a deal with Local 79 will be struck sometime soon?

1:07

Marcus Gee: We hear a deal with 79 could come later this afternoon, but it's not clear.

1:08

[Comment From Bob Robertson]

Please explain how Etobicoke was able to contract out their waste disposal services and the City of Toronto was unable to?

1:09

Marcus Gee: Etobicoke contracted out after they had a strike of their own -- and haven't had a strike since. Mayor Miller prefers to keep garbage in the hands of city unions and the city even contracted in for trash in York.

1:10

[Comment From Tyler]

Are cashable sick days available in any other Canadian municipality?

1:12

Marcus Gee: Yes, a few still have it (and Toronto police and firefighters do, too), but many others (Hamilton, York, Etobicoke) have have gotten rid of it.

1:13

[Comment From John D.]

Marcus, we don't know yet the details of the deal. Knowing what happened with Windsor how could Miller face the electorate at all by caving on every key aspect.....it just doesn't make any sense....what do you think his rationale/justification for such a 'cave' would be?

1:14

Marcus Gee: I can't imagine how he could justify a cave in, given all he has said about how strapped the city is and how the unions have to see reason.

1:14

[Comment From Ed]

Question as to the consession of eliminating banked sick days, if the original idea was to discourage absenteeism...by eliminating the ability to bank sick days, how did the city/union plan on dealing with the eventual revert of abusing sick days?

1:15

Marcus Gee: Employers who have switched to short-term disability from banked sick days say they have not seen a huge rise in absenteeism, if only because most workers are conscientious.

1:16

[Comment From Marco]

More to the point of political implications—I am concerned that the unions' attitude is simply furthering an unhealthy sense of not just entitlement to what are (let's face it) completely unreasonable demands given the current economic climate, but also of how and when negotiations should be conducted. What does the fact any sort of agreement was only reached after the union imposed a deadline tell us about the city's ability to steer this kind of event?

1:17

Marcus Gee: The city also let talks linger on until June, allowing the unions to strike when the time was ripe, so to speak -- just as hot weather made garbage a bigger issue.

1:17

[Comment From Kim]

How much has the city been able to save from the 36 days of strike? Was this amount big enough so that now the city can agree to the "all the concessions"?

1:19

Marcus Gee: The city says it hasn't calculated how much it is saving, but it certainly would not be enough to cover it losses if in fact it has dropped all its demands for concessions. Strikes save the city money in wages, but a lot of the costs are gobbled up by paying overtime to other workers, cleaning up the city afterward, etc.

1:19

[Comment From Mary Margaret]

Marcus, do you think that Mayor Miller perhaps had decided not to seek re-election before the strike which might help to explain his actions eg, would need CUPE help...and that the ballot question will be about contracting out/privatization

1:21

Marcus Gee: I see nothing to indicate that Mayor Miller is not going to run in 2010, but the strike may indeed make him more vulnerable if the issue becomes contracting out.

1:22

[Comment From Jay]

Marcus, Could you provide more details to your answer to Bob Robertson? I.e. why does the pre-amalgamation arrangement continue in Etobicoke? and didn't the union bid less than the private sector for waste disposal in the former York?

1:24

Marcus Gee: The Etobicoke deal was "grandfathered" when amalgamation happened, to Etobicoke's benefit. Toronto claims that it looked at the costs of contracted-out garbage pickup in York and decided the city could do it for cheaper, though some councillors question that.

1:25

[Comment From bill]

Some union officials were quoted last night as saying the ultimatum they gave worked. If that's true then it would certainly indicated the city caved, would it not?

1:27

Marcus Gee: It is possible that the outside workers union is simply putting a spin on the result for the benefit of its members, to soften the blow of its own concessions. We'll see.

1:27

[Comment From dave]

Rick Salutin and many other apologists for the unions have said that bankable sick days are quite common. Are they (outside of unions)?

1:27

Marcus Gee: They are still pretty common in the public sector (though many cities have gotten rid of them) but almost unheard of in the private sector.

1:28

[Comment From Jim]

I think the "City caving" is premature. All we have at this point is a union leader saying he won

1:28

Marcus Gee:

Exactly. I'd be astonished if the city gave up on the sick-day issue.

1:29

[Comment From dave]

Why didnt Miller make an effort to articulate to the public the financial crisis the city faces? Or does the city not face a crisis?

1:31

Marcus Gee: He was actually pretty forceful about this, saying that "the world has changed" and that higher costs and lower revenues stemming from the recession made a generous deal impossible. But he had a trouble selling that line because of his reputation as a big spending mayor who was not all that worried about the bottom line until recently.

1:31

[Comment From Guest]

The gap between the rich and the poor has been growing in this country for the past thirty years. Don't you think demanding concessions from city workers will only exacerbate this gap? Or, at the very least, isn't it misleading to argue against the strike in egalitarian terms (ie. other workers have it worse)?

1:32

Marcus Gee: I think the province has lost patience with the city's incessant demands for cash. The Ontario government is facing an \$18.5-billion deficit itself so....

1:33

[Comment From GeoffInCincy]

I'll be visiting Toronto next Thursday. Should I bring a clothespin or not?

1:33

Marcus Gee: Come visit and breath deep -- it should all be over by then.

1:34

[Comment From Randal]

Do you feel that Mr Miller was poorly advised on this? He came in campaigning for (amongst other things of course) an end to "divisive / confrontational" approaches, and he appeared to have drawn campaign support from certain sectors because of this. Well, his approach in the current strike would certainly have been labelled "divisive and confrontational" had anyone else undertaken it. One is tempted to wonder if Miller really did knowingly agree to gamble away his support base, or if it were just an elaborate dance. I note, though, the union criticism seems to have carefully been directed at the vague entity of "the City", rather than mentioning Miller by name (unless I missed some instances.)

1:35

Marcus Gee:

Miller would have much preferred to settle this without divisiveness, but the unions' hard line pushed him onto a corner. He is anything but a union basher.

1:36

[Comment From kyle]

While I'd love to see an election fought on this issue, it seems that privatization wouldn't be an option until this current deal expires. Given that a 'deal' has been reached with these workers, when would any future mayor/council be able to actually contract out these services?

1:38

Marcus Gee: Toronto could contract out despite signing a contract with the unions, but it would have to deal with a clause in the contract that prevents layoffs of senior workers if their jobs are contracted out (it could reassign them, however).

1:42

Sasha Nagy: Marcus,

Thanks for your time to answer questions. I apologize to those we did not get to. Stay tuned on developments out of City Hall later today, and good luck with your garbage collection. As a resident of Peel Region, I have been thankful every Tuesday the past few weeks, when my trash has been collected, and perhaps I have pulled over a little quicker when the paramedics speed by.

Stick with our coverage at globeandmail.com/toronto as we will be posting video from the picket lines shortly, along with some of our comments recorded by our reporters in the field.

1:44

Sasha Nagy: I'll post a few parting comments from our readers. But Marcus is signing off.

1:44

[Comment From Cadman]

It's hard to imagine how these grown ups and experts cannot come to an agreement much much sooner. At the end of the day, children lose all their facilities, and the youths at centre island loss all their pays throughout this strike.

1:44

[Comment From Nick]

I must dispute your assertion that bankable sick time is "unheard of in the private sector." While private sector unionization has fallen somewhat most private sector unionized employees do have sick banks.

1:44

[Comment From Paul]

I don't think the City of Toronto can stay out of Bankruptcy for long, it has created a highly paid blue collar middle class that in my opinion is not sustainable at all. City Council are supposed to be the custodians of tax payer dollars, but they spend far too much time negotiating

1:46

[Comment From T]

Taxes has been rising and rising over the last few years. If Miller did cave in, is it for certain that our taxes are going to go up again? Toronto is already expensive enough as it is to live in.

