

The mayor will pay a price for the strike

The sick leave stays. Let the anger begin sink in as Torontonians try to fathom what a loss would have looked like

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Mayor David Miller is trying gamely to present his strike-ending deal with the unions as a big win for the city. If this is what he calls winning, it is frightening to think what losing would look like.

The big issue in the strike was sick leave, specifically the city's attempt to take away workers' right to bank their unused sick leave and cash it in when they retire. The mayor boasts that the sick bank has been "eliminated," a verb he used several times Wednesday.

Eliminated, that is, for notional people who don't yet work for the city. For every one of the workers who decide to retain the benefit, it stays. They get to keep the days they have already banked. They get to keep banking them for as long as they work for the city, at the same shocking rate of 18 days a year. They get to cash them in at retirement in just the same way as they did before.

In short, they get to keep this juicy treat – almost unheard of in the private sector and rarer and rarer in the public – exactly as is. As union leaders put it in a memo to members, "there will be no changes or reductions in your entitlements" under the sick plan.

Incredibly, they are dead right. The city's last offer, presented on July 10, would have eliminated bankable sick leave for everyone. This one eliminates it only for new hires. The old offer would have compensated existing workers for the loss of bankable sick leave by buying out their accumulated days under a formula that would have put an average of \$8,500 in the pockets of senior full-time employees.

The new deal makes the buyout purely optional. Employees can take their cash now if they choose – and many may – but they can also stick with the generous status quo.

The city's new wage offer is better, too. Instead of a 7.2 per cent raise over four years, workers will get about 6 per cent over three – not bad at a time when many workers are seeing their wages frozen.

In spite of it all, Mr. Miller says Torontonians should feel "very pleased" about the settlement. It is hard to fathom why.

He says that the sick-leave deal is far better than the city would have achieved if an arbitrator had come in to end the dispute. True, but there was no sign of any arbitrator. The provincial government said all along it had no plans to order city employees back to work.

The mayor says that other municipalities, such as Mississauga and Etobicoke, allowed existing workers to keep banked sick days when those cities phased out their bankable sick leave plans. True, but others, such as York Region, simply paid workers for their banked days and got rid of bankable sick leave for everyone.

Mr. Miller gives a final reason for settling with the unions on such unfavourable terms: to get the workers back on the job. "These people were on strike for five weeks, and we needed to find a way to reach an agreement," he said.

This was the weirdest one of all. The strike was a pain, but the city was functioning reasonably well, the unions' cause was unpopular and there was no pressure on the mayor from either citizens or city council to make a deal at any cost. To the contrary, councillors said they were being peppered with calls from residents telling the city to hang tough.

Now those people feel betrayed, and with good reason. People were prepared to stand behind him as long as they thought he was standing up for them by holding the line on city costs and making sure an unrealistic perk for city workers was eliminated. It hasn't been. The mayor will pay a price.