

Wednesday, July 29, 2009 01:03 AM

Miller trumpets his big strike play

Brodie Fenlon

As a fan of Texas hold'em, I thought poker was a good analogy to [describe the big bets](#) CUPE Local 416 president Mark Ferguson made over the weekend to secure a tentative contract with the city.

But Mayor David Miller is no slouch at the game and his big "put-up-or-shut-up" move July 10 to make the city's offer public is worthy of note, as the mayor was quick to remind reporters this morning during a scrum in his office.

"With respect to going public, I don't regret that for a minute. I think that was the key moment in this whole strike," he said.

To give credit where credit is due, it *was* a master class in strategic communications, albeit one with risks.

Mr. Miller went over the heads of infuriated union leaders and spoke directly to their members and the public at an unusual mid-morning press conference, catching the union by surprise. The offer — 7.2 per cent compounded over four years and a partial payout of accumulated sick pay — was detailed in a press release and 21 pages of backgrounders. Most ingenious of all was a dedicated web page on the city's main site with an online calculator that allowed employees to punch in their years of service and salary to figure out exactly what kind of payout they'd get for their sick day credits. Thousands logged on in the first day alone.

When they finally emerged late that afternoon, Mr. Ferguson and Local 79 president Ann Dembinski cried foul and accused the mayor of bargaining in bad faith. They said he had set labour relations back decades in Toronto. But actions speak louder than words. The union leaders did not leave the bargaining table and they quickly dismissed the idea of filing a bad faith bargaining complaint with the Ontario Labour Relations Board.

Mr. Miller said everything changed after July 10. The day before, the unions were still demanding a deal equal to that given to Toronto police in an arbitrated settlement, he said. That deal included wage increases of more than 3 per cent per year. The union leaders had also vowed not to negotiate the sick leave benefit program, he noted.

"Well, in two weeks, we reached an agreement that is within our mandate and addresses our concerns, and that's why I say that was the key moment," Mr. Miller said.

"Torontonians and the people on strike didn't know what the strike was about. They were constantly told there were hundreds of pages of concessions, we were attacking seniority and that we were taking away sick days. None of that was ever true. Never true. And when we made our offer public, certainly we made it clear to people, whether union members agreed with it precisely or not, that we were attempting to be reasonable, that we were trying to be efficient and effective and that we were offering a very modern way of giving people protection when they are sick, as opposed to a benefit that benefits people when they're not sick."

"Go back to the day before, you will see what they were saying, and everything that's been settled since happened after that day."

Duly noted, Mr. Mayor.