

Analysis: Miller's costly strike victory

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[Toronto on strike](#)

By Allison Hanes

Mayor David Miller may have emerged victorious from the vote that officially ended Toronto's civic strike yesterday, but the public perception of the contentious new contracts approved by council may put more dents in his political armour than all 39 days of the summer labour disruption.

Despite threats a day earlier to derail the deal — not only by Mr. Miller's political opponents but by genuinely conflicted councillors egged on by outraged constituents — council last night ratified the collective agreements for 30,000 inside and outside workers on a tight 21-17 vote.

With many accusing him of caving to the unions, this has been the biggest battle of Mr. Miller's political career since the new tax debate of 2007.

On Friday, he won. But the question lingering over Toronto now — much more potent than the stench of rotting garbage ever was — is how soon, if ever, city residents will forgive the Mayor for putting them through six weeks of a strike without meeting their expectations — expectations he himself set and nurtured.

Mr. Miller made a final attempt to sell Torontonians on the terms of the settlement on Friday, in a speech to council in which he appeared cool and poised, a stark contrast to the hysterical tirade he launched against political opponents a day earlier.

“What's before us today is a collective agreement that for the first time in the history of the amalgamated city actually has a “1” in front of the wage increases,” Mr. Miller told a special session of council called to discuss the deal. “For the first time since the history of the amalgamated city we actually tried and succeeded to end a benefit that has a liability of \$140-million and did it in a way that municipalities across the province have done. The liability is not only capped, it will diminish considerably, easing pressure on our operating budget.”

Certainly, this deal is less rich than the ones that came before it. Canadian Union of Public Employees Locals 416 and 79, representing 30,000 outside and inside workers, were asking for raises of 3% a year. They took 1.75% in 2009, 2% in 2010 and 2.25% in 2011 — \$42-million less than they wanted, the city says.

Striking workers did succeed in holding on to a sick-day bank that allows them to accrue up to 18 days a year and cash out up to six months pay upon retirement. The city is phasing out the sick bank and replacing it with a sick-leave plan for new hires. City manager Joe Pennachetti said yesterday that, with 5,000 employees over age 55, the city in five years could slash \$140-million from what would otherwise have been a growing liability.

But for all he spins the deal, the Mayor cannot dispel the disconnect in the minds of Torontonians between the deal they thought the city was holding out for and the deal that council ratified. Mr. Miller's opponents zeroed in on this, with 11 members of the right-wing Responsible Government Group voting against the deal, as per the wishes of residents.



Photo: Mayor David Miller was able to end a long strike but what did it cost him in the end? (Tim Fraser for National Post)

And the group was not alone. Councillor Michael Thompson (Scarborough Centre) stood and tabled a raft of emails from constituents. He said he received hundreds urging him to vote against the deal and five telling him to approve it.

Councillor Rob Ford (Etobicoke North) read out some of the 23 emails he got in a two-hour period on Friday morning, only two of which urged him to ratify the contract.

Councillor Joe Mihevc (St. Paul's), who is on the left end of the political spectrum and is a stalwart ally of the Mayor, said he toyed with voting no, too, feeling the same pressures as all council members.

In the end he sided with the Mayor and decided to end the strike, but he said: "I think we have a communications problem with the deal that is before us."

On Friday, Councillor Case Ootes (Toronto Danforth) pushed the Mayor to admit the deal before council was his and his alone. "It was you that made all the decisions," thundered Mr. Ootes, whom Mr. Miller accused the previous day of lacking the "guts" to tackle the sick-bank issue when he was deputy mayor during the 2002 strike.

"I take responsibility," the Mayor shot back. "I'm not avoiding responsibility. I'm proud of this settlement."

Pride, though, has a way of going before a fall. Next year, as Mr. Miller heads into a bid for a third term as mayor, his opponents will have plenty with which to tar him.

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