

Kelly McParland: The union won, hands down

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Toronto residents have every right to feel betrayed by their boyish, big-spending Mayor as details emerge of the appalling deal he crafted with the city's 30,000 workers.

Support for the six weeks David Miller spent opposing union demands centred on overwhelming public opposition to a benefit plan that awarded workers 18 sick days a year, and let them bank the unused days for a big payout when they retire.

Nobody outside the public sector gets deals like that any more. Mr. Miller's declaration that the city could no longer afford such a gold-plated perk, and his determination to exclude it from the new contract, made

perfect sense. If his stand meant enduring weeks of inconvenience as daycares closed, pools were shuttered and garbage piled up, Torontonians were willing to put up with it - and with relative good humour - in the expectation Mr. Miller was as good as his word.

Instead, half a summer later, the Mayor has given the unions pretty much everything they wanted. The deal leaves the sick bank untouched for existing workers, and awards them a pay raise. In a city where unemployment approaches 10%, with a gaping hole at the centre of its budget, municipal workers with jobs for life can continue piling up bonus days received in reward for turning up to do the jobs they're paid for.

For all his rhetoric, for all his promises, for all the difficulties endured by Torontonians on his behalf, the Mayor has agreed to a contract with limited gains for taxpayers and plenty of concessions. CUPE Local 416 boss Mark Ferguson is justified in proclaiming he surrendered nothing, resisting "all of the concessions" the city demanded.

The union won this one folks, pure and simple.

Yesterday the Mayor was busy insisting he'd stuck to his guns, despite all evidence to the contrary. First he claimed the sick day boondoggle had been eliminated, then that it had been "grandparented," then that it would be "phased out." Sure it will be phased out - when every current employee finishes banking sick days and cashes them out.

Before the strike, Mr. Miller maintained, the union wasn't willing to discuss the sick-day package, so forcing negotiations was a victory in itself. Well, yes ... except that the union won the resulting talks hands down and gets to keep the package. Forcing negotiations, then caving across the board, can hardly be called a bargaining victory.

Taking one more stab at justifying his performance, Mr. Miller insisted the city would have done worse if it had been forced into arbitration. "If it'd been back-to-work legislation, this provision would've probably stayed for another 50 years," he said. But there's been no sign whatsoever that Premier Dalton McGuinty was considering back-to-work legislation, and the Mayor shouldn't have gone into the strike if he assumed he'd lose in the end.



Aaron Lynett / National Post Piles of garbage at a temporary dump site in Toronto's west end

The Mayor says the agreement falls within the parameters set for city negotiators and therefore meets his goals. If so, he's been dishonest with the people of Toronto, who had been led to believe the strike was about much more than maintaining the status quo. Torontonians thought they might finally be putting some limits on the privileged existence enjoyed by city employees, who have grown relentlessly in number and cost while services stagnate. The Mayor fed that belief, when it was apparently never his intention to fulfil it.

Mayor Miller sees himself as a friend of the unions, and sometimes appeared conflicted that his role as mayor during a strike put him at odds with his personal sympathies. As mayor, his duty lay in getting the best deal for the city and its taxpayers, even at the expense of his friends in labour. In the end, he opted for his emotions over his elected responsibilities. Torontonians are getting the shaft so the Mayor can feel good about himself. It's an expensive little bit of conceit. It will cost residents plenty in taxes. If we're lucky, it will also cost the Mayor his job.

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