

## Not too late to roll back councillors' pay raise

Jul 04, 2009 04:30 AM

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Two weeks down and maybe many more to go in Toronto's municipal workers strike. Common sense tells you there has to be movement in the next seven to 10 days or we might descend into a protracted strike. See Windsor, nearing three months on strike, for details.

Management doesn't seem to have any ideas to jump-start the talks that stalled after six months of futile negotiations. Mayor David Miller sent a direct message to the striking workers yesterday, via the daily media briefing: "Enough is enough," he said, a hollow warning/desperate cry that was nearly drowned out by picketers bellowing just outside the briefing hall at Metro Hall.

Didn't sound or look like an olive branch to most observers.

The *Toronto Star's* editorial board has seized on an idea that might change the tone of the relationship.

Miller and city council are hypocritical to approve for themselves a 2.42 per cent pay hike in March, only to then freeze the income of management staff and offer their unionized workers a pay freeze this year and next and a 1 per cent hike in 2011.

Roll back the hike as a goodwill gesture, the *Star* has admonished. Say your mea culpa. Then use the publicity and support from the public to appeal to civic employees for restraint.

Editorial after editorial has drummed home the idea – to no avail. Miller and his stubborn allies, predictable and piggish when it comes to spending tax dollars on themselves, seem immune to the criticism. They see no hypocrisy in their position. They cover themselves in excuses so facile and absurd as to embarrass their profession.

One claims the pay increase isn't a pay hike, just a cost-of-living allowance. Another claims councillors have a contract with the city and rolling back the hike would violate the contract. Yes, we pay these guys.

Miller didn't help when he defended the councillors' pay raise because, he said, councillors don't make as much as police officers, who get overtime.

The issue is not how much Toronto councillors make. The principle applies to a councillor making \$9,000 or \$99,000. This is about council's credibility and moral authority – two potent weapons in the battle for the hearts of the public in this dispute

Yesterday, the mayor and city manager repeated the memorized talking points on the strike. A new deal must be fair to the workers and affordable to the city and recognize that the world has changed since last year.

Seems like Miller could go to his council and ask them to give back the pay hike (confirmed after the economic slide) because the world has changed since the annual automatic hikes were approved. This would bolster a similar argument to the workers. Miller refuses – for several reasons.

Some of his closest allies are strident opponents of the pay giveback. Secondly, by refusing to roll back the pay hike, Miller can have it both ways. He didn't take his hike, turning it back to the city, but his new salary base did go up by nearly \$4,000 and next year's hike will be on top of the \$167,000, not the 2008 wage of \$163,000. Besides, his pension is calculated on the higher amount. Ditto for councillors.

Meanwhile, those who say they gave the pay raise to charity also get a tax receipt. Little wonder so many are playing this disingenuous game.

Now, the salary issue is so politicized that striking workers might dismiss a belated rollback as too cynical. Still, in the absence of other solutions to move both sides toward concession, it's worth pursuing.

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