

# Toronto's Mayor lashes out against striking city workers

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David Miller, Toronto's purported "pro-labor" mayor, released to the media Friday details of the city's latest concessionary contract offers to 24,000 striking municipal workers.

"Enough is enough," Miller told reporters after outlining an offer that would represent a cut in real wages for the city workers and save the city tens of millions of dollars by terminating the current sick-leave plan. "It's time to say yes to a deal."

"The unions," declared Miller, "have maintained a position that can at best be described as unrealistic."

Miller's unprecedented move was aimed at stoking the virulent campaign that Toronto's corporate elite, with its media outlets leading the charge, have mounted against the modestly paid inside and outside municipal workers.

Because they have refused to accept a cut in real wages, the weakening of seniority rights, increased workload and other concessions, the press has chastised the municipal workers for their "selfishness" and "sense of entitlement." This in a city that is home to Canada's financial and corporate elite—an elite whose incomes and wealth have swelled as a result of the past two decades of class war, including the transfer of hundreds of billions of dollars from public and social services to corporate, capital gains, and personal income tax cuts.

By going over the heads of the bargaining committees of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPA) Locals 79 and 416, Miller hoped to provide the media with further fodder for their anti-strike campaign, in particular their attempt to demoralize the strikers by portraying them as isolated, and to demonstrate to the corporate establishment that he is prepared to bring the unions to heel.

Powerful corporate voices, ~~Globe~~ as the *Mail*, have declared Miller's ability to impose concessions on the city workers as pivotal in determining whether he merits re-election next year. The *National Post* and *Toronto Sun*, meanwhile, have accused Miller of pandering to the unions because he has not threatened the strikers with layoffs and privatization.

Miller's gambit follows closely on the heels of pressures exerted by Toronto's powerful tourist industry magnates. They are outraged that the strike could disrupt several large city festivals, including the week-long late July Caribana carnival, which traditionally draws hundreds of thousands of domestic and international revelers to the city's hotels, restaurants and bars.

Just prior to Miller's provocative announcement, CNN broadcast a segment entitled "Toronto Stinks," while the *San Francisco Chronicle* ran a travel piece that melodramatically compared the city to unappealing and dangerous third world destinations.

The strike has caused a halt to garbage collection in Canada's largest city, forced the closure of 57 city-run daycare centers, shut down municipal swimming pools and recreational activities, and has affected a broad array of other municipal services. Twenty-two city parks have been turned into temporary garbage dump sites and the city's public health office has declared that at least six of those sites represent a hazard to public health. Sixteen public health orders have been issued to date, requiring chemical treatment of vermin infested public sites.

Six thousand other members of the two striking locals, working in ambulance services, water purification, sewage disposal and other occupations deemed by law to be essential to the public interest,

continue to provide their services to the city.

The press has blamed all the stink and inconvenience on the strikers, with many a columnist suggesting, and some outright declaring, that in these recessionary times the city workers should consider themselves lucky to have a job.

For six months prior to the strike, city negotiators would not budge on over one hundred pages of concessionary demands, including an end to an established sick pay policy, across-the-board attacks on seniority rights and cuts to benefits programs. In a further provocation, they did not even table their zero per cent “wage offer” until three hours before the union’s strike deadline.

Mark Ferguson, president of CUPE Local 416 representing the 6,200 striking outside workers and Ann Dembinski representing CUPE Local 79’s 18,000 striking inside workers provided Miller with the means to go public with negotiations and undercut the strike by keeping the membership entirely in the dark about the status of the bargaining process over the past month.

Neither strikers nor the general public were ever informed by the union about the full extent of the city’s concessionary demands. Nor was any attempt made to warn and mobilize working people against the wholesale budget and social services cuts that loom on the city’s budgetary horizon. CUPE Local 416 went as far as to cancel a June 23rd membership meeting rather than assemble the rank-and-file for input on the strike strategy. Picket lines are being policed by the union to ensure that rank-and-file workers do not speak to the press and public, thus instilling an attitude of docility among the strikers and preventing them from answering the establishment’s barrage of anti-worker propaganda.

Miller’s latest proposal includes wage increases worth 7.2 per cent over four years. This is well short of the 3 per cent per year deals struck over the past year with the Police Association and other municipal bargaining units. The proposed deal also calls for cutbacks in dental and pharmaceutical benefit programs. The city is adamant that the policy allowing employees to “bank” their sick days and cash any remaining days out (up to six months) upon retirement must be abolished and replaced with a Short Term Disability Policy. It has provided provisions for partial payouts to those higher seniority workers with days

already “banked”.

Said Ferguson in response to the latest offer, “We have no interest in a race to the bottom. Our members have been made a promise over the course of their careers to have saved and banked their sick times on goodwill and the expectation that there would be a small severance benefit for them when they retire. We are not prepared to let the city strip away this collective agreement entitlement. These are not people of means that have stock options and preferred shares. They have a small nest egg that they can count on—if in fact they are healthy enough to have banked any time at all.”

According to press reports, the leadership of Local 79 has already accepted the city’s proposals regarding the short-term disability plan, leaving wages as the only issue still in dispute between the city and the bargaining committee for the inside workers.

While Canada’s corporate elite, with its venomous campaign against the strikers, has made clear that it views the strike as a significant challenge to its drive to impose the burden of the capitalist crisis on the working people and signalled that it will support provincial legislation to break the strike and impose concessions if the workers can’t be cowed, the CUPE leadership has sought to confine the inside workers’ struggle within the most narrow and politically stultifying collective bargaining framework.

No attempt has been made to make the strike a spearhead of working class resistance to concessions, layoffs and budget cuts. Indeed, apart from ritualistic solidarity messages, CUPE has done nothing even to link the Toronto city workers’ strike with the three-month old strike being mounted by 1800 city workers and fellow CUPE members in Windsor, Ontario.



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