

THE STRIKE THAT NEVER HAD TO HAPPEN

Thursday, August 6, 2009

The 2009 strike by City of Toronto employees became, in total number of work days lost, the largest strike in this city's history. When CUPE locals 79 and 416 entered collective bargaining early this year, nobody could imagine that their 24,000 members would be walking picket lines for over five weeks to defend their collective agreements.

Sadly, the entire dispute was instigated by a Mayor whose campaign featured the slogan "For David Miller, every day is Labour Day." He was determined to impose a significantly lower wage settlement than the patterns that prevailed in more than fifty municipal agreements signed over the last year. That, combined with a demand to give up sick time banking that has been in place for sixty years, and dozens of pages of concessions, guaranteed a collision.

Very few people realize that for eight years in the 1990s, City of Toronto and Metro Toronto workers went without a wage increase, with no thanks from the public or the politicians. Since then, their increases have still not caught up with inflation. On the other hand, managers and supervisors continued to be awarded "merit bonuses" of up to 3 per cent every year, over and above the general cost of living increases.

During the last provincial election, we warned that the failure to upload social service and welfare costs would have huge implications when the economy slowed down. That pressure was the "elephant in the room" at these negotiations, and it was very telling that Deputy Premier George Smitherman took to the streets during the strike leading the provocative "community clean-ups" with people like John Tory and Case Ootes. On top of that, new auditing rules are being applied that target workers' sick time.

Since the strike began, Labour Council coordinated support from our affiliates for our CUPE brothers and sisters. Steelworkers, autoworkers, hotel workers, teachers and education workers, firefighters, postal workers, other CUPE activists, OPSEU members and the construction trades all turned out in solidarity. It was a reflection of the commitment made at the Stewards Assembly for our movement to stand together during this crisis.

While the strike is now over, the experience has poisoned labour relations at the City for years to come. As well, it raises serious questions about the future of the Miller government. The Mayor has burned many bridges, and the failure of labour-endorsed Councillors to act independently needs to be addressed.

The anti-union momentum whipped up by right-wing politicians and sections of the media will soon be translated into a drive to outsource and privatize, no doubt using the next budget as the focus. The entire labour movement will again need to be mobilized to tackle that threat, and to protect decent union jobs that pay fair wages and benefits.

This strike most certainly never needed to happen. But thousands of city workers went through an invaluable experience of standing up for their rights, sticking to their union, and the power of solidarity. That experience will surely serve them well in years to come.