

CITY COUNCIL

Miller wins tight vote on TTC's right to strike

Council won't ask province to declare transit 'essential service'

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Thanks to an unlikely ally to his right - Etobicoke Councillor Doug Holyday - Toronto Mayor David Miller won a tight vote yesterday as Toronto City Council turned down the contentious idea of asking Queen's Park to strip the city's transit workers of their right to strike.

After a daylong debate, city council voted 23-22 against asking the province to declare the Toronto Transit Commission an "essential service," the closest vote on a major issue the mayor has faced since the temporary defeat of his land-transfer and car-registration taxes last year.

Councillors did vote in favour of a series of compromise motions, supported by the mayor, asking Queen's Park to make Wheel-Trans, the TTC's special service for the disabled, essential. (As it is, the union usually agrees to operate some emergency Wheel-Trans service during strikes.) They also voted to ask the province to legislate that the union provide 48 hours notice before any walkout.

Those supporting a total strike ban argued that transit strikes allow a union to shut down the city and hold Torontonians to "ransom" for wage hikes.

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Mr. Miller and his supporters, citing a study by the C.D. Howe Institute, argued the move would drive up wages but fail to guarantee an end to work stoppages, as the union could still strike illegally or work to rule.

When two centrist councillors - Bill Saundercook (Ward 13, Parkdale-High Park) and Paul Ainslie (Ward 43, Scarborough East) - decided to support the strike ban, it appeared the motion might pass. But Mr. Holyday (Ward 3, Etobicoke Centre) - normally a fierce critic of the city's unions - then voted with the mayor.

"Why would a so-called right-wing councillor not see people's rights?" Mr. Holyday said, arguing that other alternatives - such as forcing a striking union to maintain rush-hour service - weren't explored.

"I think it's a serious matter to take away the labour rights of a group of individuals."

The dramatic vote capped a campaign by two of Mr. Miller's council critics, Cliff Jenkins (Ward 25, Don Valley West) and Cesar Palacio (Ward 17, Davenport), that capitalized on outrage over the transit union's surprise April strike. Mr. Jenkins predicted that the issue would resurface in the 2010 election campaign.

Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty said before the strike he would at least consider a request from the city to strip the union of its right to strike, but later cautioned the city not to act in "emotional" haste. It was not known whether the province would act on any of yesterday's resolutions.

The at-times heated debate was watched impassively by Bob Kinnear, president of Local 113 of the Amalgamated Transit Union, which walked off the job in April for two days before being legislated back to work and was blamed for one-day illegal strike in May, 2006.

In her speech from the council floor, Councillor Gloria Lindsay Luby (Ward 4, Etobicoke Centre), the only member of the mayor's executive to vote for a strike ban, addressed Mr. Kinnear and scolded him for stranding people on a Friday night.

"Shame on you for doing that. That's totally irresponsible. The public deserves better!" she said. "We're paying your wages!"

Talking to reporters, Mr. Kinnear - who opposes the strike ban - dismissed the council proceedings as meaningless, since any real decision lies with the province.

"This is irrelevant," he said, "and has been a big waste of taxpayers' money."