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Who should have a right to strike?

August 06, 2009

Hospital nurses, police and firefighters save lives, so it is entirely understandable that they aren't allowed to go on strike. What's odd is that ambulance workers *do* have the right to strike. Now, after a 39-day strike by Toronto's municipal employees that caused emergency response times to slip, it seems appropriate to consider declaring ambulances an essential service.

City council is to hear a motion from Councillor Michael Walker today urging the province to deem Toronto's Emergency Medical Services essential, thereby removing these workers' right to strike. Walker wants their contracts set through binding arbitration using "final offer selection." Under this approach, labour and management each submit a final package; an arbitrator chooses one of the competing offers to be adopted in full.

In an effort to protect public safety, the city and the union signed an essential services agreement allowing Toronto EMS to operate at 75 per cent capacity during the strike. With three-quarters of the operation already deemed essential, it scarcely seems a dramatic step to put the remaining 25 per cent in the same category.

Even that missing 25 per cent caused a 53-second drop in response time during the strike. And an additional delay of almost a minute could be fatal in some cases, especially for people suffering cardiac arrest. (This wasn't exactly the case for Jim Hearst, who died of a heart attack on June 25 after ambulance workers took a half-hour to reach him. They were evidently on the scene in 9 minutes but didn't enter Hearst's building because they allegedly believed it was unsafe.)

Strike-bound Toronto EMS took an average 9 minutes and 11 seconds to respond to life-threatening emergencies – that's 12 seconds longer than the desired standard. In light of that, a case can be made for declaring the full ambulance service to be essential.

Walker has other motions before council asking that Toronto's garbage collection and city-run daycare and children's services be similarly designated. But while these services are important, trash collection and daycare are not life-and-death matters. The ambulance service is, however.



Walker's ambulance motion requires a two-thirds vote of city council to win approval. It is unlikely to meet that threshold. Rather than shelving it, however, city council should send his motion to committee for an in-depth assessment and hearings. Now, when the strike is fresh in everyone's mind, is the best time to address this issue.

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