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Testing Rob Ford's union mettle: Ashton

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Are the coming negotiations with Toronto's labour unions going to be a labour of love for our new mayor, or a test of his stomach for a fight?

For a city, wages are the biggest cost in the budget. And controlling your budget depends largely on getting favourable union contracts.

Relations with the labour unions can make or break a mayor. You only need to look to the disastrous 2009 garbage strike that saw Mayor David Miller's political future crash and burn.

But mayor-elect Rob Ford might have some good timing and the labour Gods on his side once the negotiation season officially opens.

Toronto Fire Fighters' are sitting patiently waiting for a decision from arbitration later in 2011. And if recent arbitrated decisions for provincial health care workers are any indication, their new contracts should be shinier than a red fire engine. No one can lay blame at Ford's door on this outcome.

Contracts for the "Big Six" CUPE Locals, including the inside and outside workers, expire on Dec. 31, 2011 with negotiations likely crawling into the following summer – rotting garbage in the dog days of August meets the smell test for striking unions.

Not having to confront Toronto's outside workers until year two of his term, Ford's first real test will be getting a contract with the police union starting in the hangover days following New Years.

Peek-a-boo

A big police booster, Ford can afford to play political peek-a-boo behind the Police Services Board and not worry about an essential service hitting the bricks. Maybe a few baseball caps and work to rule, but otherwise all hands on deck fighting crime.

Give him a get out of jail free card on this one.

The gravy train may have been stopped at City Hall, but the TTC union train will leave the station on March 31, 2011 when their collective agreement expires. But the real battle with this union will take place in the first three months of 2011 as Ford and his followers move to declare the TTC an essential service and honour a campaign pledge.

It's guesswork to know how hard the union will fight against being declared an essential service since arbitrated settlements most often fall in their favour. Even though taking away a union's right to strike rips at a core principle of the union movement.

So if the province says yes to the city's request to declare the TTC an essential service, Ford gets a ride free card from this potential political train wreck while appearing on the surface to be taking on the unions and protecting the

public.

But we know Ford's election wasn't just about the size of Toronto council, it was about reining in the unions and controlling runaway costs.

One big promise that fuelled the Ford landslide was privatizing garbage collection and expanding upon the Etobicoke contracting out experience.

I recall in the summer of 2002, in the midst of a garbage strike, when then Mayor Mel Lastman said: "I can't offer unionized employees jobs for life."

Jobs for life

This clarion call was greeted by the union saying the mayor didn't have a mandate from the people of the city to privatize city services.

Does today's mayor have a public mandate to privatize garbage collection? And will he use his first year to set the stage for a knock'em-down brawl with the garbage union?

Or will he find the battle too costly, politically damaging, and too tough to stomach?

- Ashton's career as a Toronto city councillor ends Tuesday

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