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TIME AS A WEAPON OF WAR

THIRTEEN WEEKS AND COUNTING

Community Living Renfrew County South OPSEU Local 472

An opinion feature on the politics of a prolonged labour dispute

Community Living Renfrew County South and **OPSEU Local 472** have been locked in a labour stalemate for thirteen weeks, and honestly, at this rate, there's no telling how many more weeks it might take to bring this thing to a close.

After accusations and counter-accusations around getting the other party to “*come to the table*,” we now seem to be entering a phase where the combatants are both making public statements — less so in the case of management — that indicate that they're willing to talk with the other party.

Eureka! At last! Finally! A light at the end of the tunnel!

Well, friends, I'm going to have to caution you to hold your horses and maybe not be in such a big rush to buy the victory balloons and noise makers.

Because now we're being treated to a political game of **peek-a-boo**, where both sides express agreement to talk, but then disagree on things like the identity of the mediator. And then, when that finally gets settled, suddenly one side or the other is “*unavailable*” to attend on any given day.

THE POLITICS OF A LONG STRIKE

This is the politics of a lengthy strike and both sides play the game.

I remain, for the most part, sympathetic to the union's position, and am entirely sympathetic with the rank-and-file workers walking the line. But make no mistake, unions can play politics too.

This, of course, is entirely frustrating.

This is also entirely bullshit on the part of the opposing parties.

After clamouring for twelve weeks for the other side to come to the table, brandishing signs demanding as much, you're now too busy to go and talk when the moment presents itself?

Let me get this straight.

You're unavailable?

You're too busy?

Would it be impolite to ask **too busy doing what, exactly?**

Too busy posturing would be my bet, and the same goes for the management side, likely even more so.

Meanwhile, the rest of us — the taxpayers, impacted families, and even the workers — look on in abject frustration.

A STRATEGIC DELAY

Unfortunately, this kind of nonsense is not unusual in long labour disputes.

The statements issued by both sides are, I suppose, technically true in that both sides may genuinely be willing to meet with a mediator. In theory.

But that's not going to stop them from engaging in tactics that amount to **strategic delay**, where time is wasted arguing over:

- which mediator,
- when the talks will take place,
- where they'll take place,
- and under what conditions.

In short, both sides are buying time, which comes across as a tad ridiculous after twelve weeks of nothing.

The obvious question is:

Time to do what?

WHAT THEY'RE BUYING TIME FOR

Time to get ready for the talks.

Time to arrive at a strategy for the talks.

Time to coordinate information and arguments.

Time to consult with political consultants and lawyers.

Time to consult with upper management on one side, and time to consult with union leadership on the other.

Which is kind of strange, given that one might logically assume such things would have been hammered out well before today.

But politics often excludes logical and rational thought.

Nevertheless, the grown-ups in the room still continue to play the game, even though they're often not very good at it.

NOW THE OPTICS MATTER MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE

Because after over twelve weeks of picketing, this strike is not solely about wages, seniority, or working conditions anymore.

It's now about optics.

Specifically:

Who will be blamed for a strike that has already lasted so long?

Both sides know the value of community support.

And there are a lot of people watching now, and not just the families of clients.

- Local politicians
- Potential donors
- Agency board members

- The Ontario taxpayer

All are watching.

If Community Living can say, *“We offered dates and the union wasn’t available,”* it helps its public position.

If OPSEU can say, *“We accepted mediation and the employer delayed,”* it helps theirs.

And makes them appear to be the good guys.

Both sides are now playing to a public audience, attempting to position themselves favourably in the **court of public opinion**.

THE MEDIATOR

First, as to the mediator.

Mediators are people too, which means they’re far from perfect.

After doing this work for a period of time, a mediator will begin to develop a reputation.

The Questions Both Sides Ask

- Is the mediator interventionist?
- A hard-ass?
- A hands-on type?
- More of a facilitator and peace maker?
- Do they have a record of favouring the employer or the employee?
- Do they understand the industry, bargaining history, and the legislation that governs it?

Obviously, both sides will be angling for a mediator they believe will not only give them a fair shake, but who might also lean sympathetically toward their position.

TIME AS A WEAPON OF WAR

We further have to remember that **time is a weapon in this war**.

By dragging out the timeline, a party can hope that some other significant event will occur during the delay.

Some Possibilities

Maybe the cost of replacement workers, security guards, private investigators, and related expenses becomes simply too much, forcing management — and perhaps government — to capitulate.

Maybe strike pay becomes unsustainable, increasing pressure on the union.

Maybe the Board of Directors resigns en masse in protest over inadequate government funding.

Don't bet on it, but stranger things have happened.

Maybe they won't resign.

Maybe they'll fire the Executive-Director.

Don't bet on that either, but sometimes you just never know.

Maybe the government comes to its senses and starts making noise that it is tiring of the whole affair, and that developmental services will be funded adequately moving forward.

I suppose, in a sense, that would be worth waiting for.

That is the result I'm most hoping for.

Maybe public opinion shifts dramatically during the delay.

That can light fires under asses as well.

Maybe God will show up.

THE REAL OBJECTIVE

So delay is strategic in the sense that it allows both sides to identify and lean on points of leverage.

And friends, that's what this is all about.

Leverage.

Finding ways to lean into a perceived weakness of the other side.

Meanwhile...

While the strategists strategize...

While the politicians posture...

While the mediators are debated...

While the calendars are negotiated...

Clients continue to languish.

- No services
- Reduced services
- Inadequate services

And the community continues to wait for the self-styled master politicians and strategists to do their thing, whatever that may ultimately be.

I pray that I'm wrong.