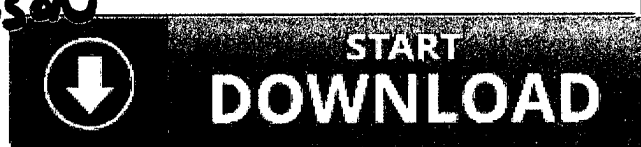


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THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

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Toronto firefighters union yells 'fire' in a crowded chamber

By MARCUS GEE

Firefighters organization stands accused of fear mongering for its attempt to get special treatment amid calls for austerity

The Toronto firefighters union is known for its powers of persuasion. When the fire service was under pressure last year to restrain its spending, the union flooded the city-council chamber with burly firefighters in red T-shirts that read "fewer firefighters, greater risk." Union leader Ed Kennedy visited the scene of a fatal fire and condemned "dangerous" budget cuts.

It worked. Few city councillors want to get on the wrong side of this vocal union, and city council duly voted to withdraw some threatened cuts and restore \$3.1-million to the fire-service budget.

Obviously encouraged by their success, the firefighters are taking their campaign of fear to a new level this year. An ad launched by the union last week shows a fireman emerging from the smoke with a teddy bear in his hand and a stricken look on his face. "City councillors don't have to deal with this. We do," it says.

"In a fire, seconds count," it continues. "Just a few can mean the difference between life and death for you and your loved ones." It goes on to condemn city council's "reckless plan to cut millions from fire services."

Councillor Denzil Minnan-Wong calls that unfair. "The proposition is that we're going to let some child die. Rubbish."

He said that council relies on the advice of the fire chief when it doles out money to the fire service and that Fire Chief Jim Sales says he does not expect a rise in response times – the key measure of how long it takes firefighters to get to a fire.

"The fire chief is wrong," Mr. Kennedy told me. He said response times will rise and he makes no apology for the ads. "The campaign is deliberately hard-hitting and that's for a reason. Councillors need to know the results of their actions if the actions they take risk lives." The ads refer to children, he said, because seniors and children under five are the most vulnerable in a fire.

The debate over the ads raises a fundamental question: who runs this place? Should city council be basing its decisions on the facts presented by its professional staff or the alarmist publicity campaign of a powerful union whose main job is to protect the jobs of its members?

Deputy city manager John Livey rejects the idea that the proposed fire budget will put lives at risk. "We would not be recommending any of those things if that were the case," he told reporters on Monday. City councillor Frank Di Giorgio, the budget chief, was asked if the ads amount to fear mongering. "From my perspective, yes," he replied.

Yet the ads, and the associated lobbying campaign by the union, are bound to have an effect. Mr. Di Giorgio and several other councillors say they are getting lots of calls complaining about potential cuts to fire service.

In one sign that the pressure is working, city council's executive committee voted last week to cut the number of fire trucks by four instead of the proposed five. That would add \$2-million in costs. If last year's budget debate is anything to go by, there will be more pressure and more concessions when the full city council meets on Wednesday and Thursday. "We are getting a lot of positive feedback from a lot of councillors," said the union's Mr. Kennedy.

As for whether that ad went too far, he said: "It may not have gone far enough."

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