

Enough trash talk about striking workers

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Oh, the garbage about the garbage.

It stinks how Toronto is so focused on garbage collectors and their sick days – as if they are the only strikers in this now 24-day-long labour dispute between the city and some 30,000 workers.

Yes, I know it's the pits at Christie Pits.

I count myself lucky that the parks through which I walk my dog are turning into meadows filled with daisies, chicory, Queen Anne's lace and other wildflowers. There are no rat-infested mountains on my turf.

That, and I have been made shockingly aware of my carbon footprint.

For example, the stiff plastic and non-recyclable packaging which contains my organic lettuce and berries, all trucked or flown in from California or South America, make up the bulk of what I put into my grey bin.

And I pay for the large one.

But my garage is raccoon-proof, and roomy enough for me to ride this out, not because Mayor David Miller has asked those of us who can store our garbage to do so, but because I don't want to add to the problems in other neighbourhoods.

That said, I am sickened by all the trash talk about the strikers.

Let's leave aside the garbage collectors, whose back-breaking work I would not want ever, let alone on those days when the thermometer dips below minus 20 or above plus 20. Frankly, I'd be sick more than 18 days a year.

What's more, if I had given the city monetary concessions during past contract talks in return for those days – which the city neglected to budget for – I would not budge at all.

These (mostly, but not all) guys make up the minority of the people on the picket lines.

The rest – more than 70 per cent of the 24,000 inside workers of Local 79 – are women, including 10,000 part-timers who make barely above minimum wage.

According to Local 79 president Ann Dembinski, most of these part-timers, who would not qualify for much under the current Employment Insurance scheme, get no sick leave at all.

None. Zero. Zip.

"We were finally getting these people decent wages and, for some, decent benefits, and now the city wants to take them away," says Dembinski.

That, despite how they work in the sneezy snotty daycare centres where they wipe noses and bums all day long.

That, despite how they work in the hostels and shelters where who-knows-who is carrying who-knows-what germs.

Yes, some members of Local 79 earn, after years and years of service, between \$30 to \$40 an hour, but they are also educated with, for example, degrees in early childhood education or social work.

They are public health nurses who care for new mothers, the poor and those with sexually transmitted diseases.

They look after the weak and fragile in the city's homes for the aged – and, by the way, these people have no right to strike.

They put their lives on the line and yet, considering the salary increases being offered to them in comparison with what the mostly male-dominated police and fire fighters have won, they are being insulted, if not outright discriminated against.

"During the SARS crisis, during the Legionnaire's Disease crisis, our members continued to go in there," Dembinski tells me. "They pick something up, they don't get a single day in sick time."

Just because they are invisible, both in their jobs and during this strike, does not mean their work is not as valuable or necessary as that performed by the police and firefighters.

It's just that their front lines are different.

Their picket lines should not be ignored just because they perform what too many people think of as "women's work."

Walk a few hours in their shoes, will you?

Show some support.

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