

McGuinty's purposeful inaction

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As the Toronto civic workers' strike drags into its fifth week, Dalton McGuinty remains resolutely and deliberately invisible.

The Ontario premier is the one person who can swiftly bring a legislated end to the 31-day labour dispute that has seen child-care centres close and garbage pile up. But you won't hear him say that.

Unless he's forced to, you won't hear him say anything about the Toronto strike, or a similar one in Windsor – except that residents in both cities are doing a swell job.

"My hat's off to the people living in this community ... because they're acting responsibly," a resolutely upbeat McGuinty said recently during a quick in and out visit to a Windsor windmill factory.

"There's not a tremendous amount of visible evidence that we're mired in a garbage strike, either here in Windsor or back in Toronto."

Translation: I don't have to wade through piles of rat-infested garbage to get to my limo.

McGuinty's remarkably blasé approach has two sources.

The first is political. A cautious man, the premier is averse to involving himself in any dispute he can avoid.

So far, he has managed to deftly avoid both the Windsor and Toronto strikes. In Toronto, public anger is directed at the striking unions or Mayor David Miller.

Toronto council is not calling for McGuinty to intervene. Nor are the provincial opposition parties. Nor are the newspaper editorial boards.

In Windsor, as University of Windsor philosophy professor Jeff Noonan writes in the Internet publication *The Bullet*, moonlighters – including some striking civic workers – are easing the pressure on that city's council by collecting household garbage for cash.

Last year, McGuinty did move to end a TTC strike after just two days. But that was uncharacteristically speedy. His instinct is to hang back until forced by public pressure, as he did last fall when he waited 11 weeks to end a teaching assistants' strike that had paralyzed York University.

But the second reason for the premier's caution is economic. In both the Windsor and Toronto strikes, recession-savaged city councils are trying to whittle back non-wage compensation.

In the Windsor case, council's aim is to gradually phase out post-retirement benefits. In Toronto, the employer's target is the current system of sick-day benefits.

Both arrangements were negotiated long ago as part of efforts by employees to win compensation packages able to provide for both current and future needs.

In the world that is being reconstructed today, however, such arrangements are anathema. They create future fixed liabilities that interfere with the ability of employers to use their capital in the most flexible and profitable manner possible.

McGuinty understands this. He also understands that if he does order civic workers back on the job, the final decision on their compensation will be made by professional arbitrators, who are by definition conservative and therefore unlikely to give municipal employers all of the take-backs they want.

Indeed, some economists, such as the C.D. Howe Institute's Ben Dachis, argue that compulsory arbitration in public sector strikes almost always tends to favour the employees.

For the premier then, it is more convenient to let the strikes drag on. Why do something you don't have to? Why do something that might interfere with the efficient mobilization of capital?

Better to visit windmill factories. Better to muse about electric cars.

Thomas Walkom's column appears Wednesday and Saturday.