

Strike isn't about fairness, it's about power

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The other day, Toronto Mayor David Miller was being interviewed on the radio. So I listened.

The city's position on the garbage strike, said Miller, was that the settlement had to be "fair and responsible." Fair to the workers, that is, but at the same time responsible in the sense of taking account of the city's financial circumstances.

At this point, I yawned. Miller went on. To achieve such a settlement, he said, the union needed to figure out "how to say yes."

At that point, I turned off the radio.

Oh dear. Miller is a decent guy. He is very intelligent. To offset those assets, he's a '60s liberal.

In the 1960s, liberalism was fine. Anyway, back then almost everyone was one.

The world's since moved on. Or maybe it's moved downward.

Our prolonged economic boom, which always was the motor fuel of a great deal of the old, optimistic liberalism, is over.

Sure, we've dodged the depression, and the recession will end sooner or later.

But, virtually certainly, economic growth is going to be slow and difficult for a long time to come.

Unemployment is likely to remain high. People will remain cautious about spending, which means no consumer boom.

Even when things get better again, economic growth in the West (the one place on the globe where liberals can come out of the closet) is going to slip well behind that of distinctly unliberal countries like China. Which means we'll be borrowing ideas from the Chinese, as they and many around the world once borrowed from us.

Back to the garbage strike. (There is a connection).

It's time overdue for Miller to stop talking, and presumably thinking, in 1960s platitudes.

The strike isn't about fairness and responsibility. It's about power.

Garbage collectors have the power – not absolute, but considerable – to blackmail people into giving them more money. That they are already exceptionally well-paid, especially when account is taken of fringe benefits and virtual job security for life (these days, worth a lot), is neither here nor there.

To paraphrase Mao Zedong, power grows out of the barrel of a monopoly.

Monopoly power is the distinguishing characteristic of public sector workers. And it in turn is the reason that, for just about all practical purposes, all strikes are now by public sector workers. (As a further discouragement to any strike-minded private sector workers, their action may very well bankrupt their employer, a side effect impossible in the public sector.)

Hence the piles of garbage in Toronto; hence the students at York University who last fall were put at risk of losing an entire semester, perhaps even an entire year, by their own teachers; hence all the Ottawa commuters

who spent months walking/bicycling/begging lifts from car-driving neighbours during the long bus strike there in the winter. And Via Rail workers may soon join the list.

It's unfair, though, to criticize the garbage collectors and their public sector kin. Who among those reading this column who possessed power wouldn't take advantage of that asset?

Power can only be dealt with by the application of countervailing power. Otherwise, the self-interests of the few ride roughshod over those of the many (doubly hurtful in the current instance since it is the many who pay for the salaries of the few).

This is what someone has to tell Miller. Tell him that the days when it was possible to suppose that all problems could be solved fairly and reasonably by everyone getting together, holding hands and singing "Kumbaya" really are over.

The old days were attractive and bright-eyed and optimistic. Today's days of power aren't pleasant. But they're the times we're living in. So suck it up, Mr. Mayor and be a leader, not a cheerleader.

Richard Gwyn's column appears Friday. gwynr@sympatico.ca