

One striking worker. One angry resident. Let's talk

Two women on opposite sides of the walkout have a face-to-face. The result: an understanding

"I feel, Susan, that this is a little bit of holding the city hostage"

- Darlene Pellman, 58, in conversation with striking worker Susan Rose

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Their common ground is their common ground.

A striking city employee picketing at a temporary east-end dump site and a resident who can see and smell stewing garbage mounds from her sidewalk have each walked their dogs on the Ted Reeve Arena fields. They've wandered the same city streets, poked around Kingston Rd.'s eclectic storefronts, walked barefoot on the beach and watched new construction erode the old-Toronto charm of the neighbourhood.

Their neighbourhood.

But Susan Rose, a 48-year-old parks maintenance worker, and 58-year-old grandmother Darlene Pellman didn't realize they were neighbours until the *Star* pulled Rose off the picket line and Pellman from her porch to discuss the strike that has polarized Toronto.

The idea of the face-to-face dialogue was to persuade a member of each extreme – aggrieved workers who feel they're being punished and furious residents who live amid reeking refuse – to cease hostilities long enough to discuss what the city is experiencing.

Rose, a voluble, spunky picket captain, was quick to volunteer as the union's proxy.

Trash-toting locals weren't as generous. The *Star* was turned down by several dismissive drivers unloading garbage, a cyclist with a single bag, a man with his dog and another man who said he had "a high-profile job." Pellman, however, had enough backbone to be interviewed as the city's voice.

The women agreed separately to listen to each other's position before Rose, who asked and received permission to leave the picket line, walked down Pellman's street, the stench of ripe garbage wafting the same way.

"Hey, Clover!" said Rose, recognizing Pellman by the name of her 7-year-old yellow lab.

Oops. The chance of verbal fireworks just fizzled.

Surprised, the women introduced themselves formally, hugged, laughed and shared some doggie talk – neither walk their pets at Ted Reeve anymore because rodent-killing chemicals are used on the trash. Then they got to the unpleasant business that has closed city pools, parks and halted garbage collection.

"Why are you out, Susan, because I honestly don't know the whole story and that's the truth," said Pellman.



SARAH DEA/TORONTO STAR PHOTOS

BEFORE (top): Picketeer Susan Rose debates with resident Darlene Pellman. AFTER (bottom): City worker Susan Rose and Beach resident Darlene Pellman say they now have a better understanding of each other's situation — as aggrieved worker and furious resident — during the strike.

"And that's unfortunate and I'm not surprised you don't," said Rose, accusing the media of "pumping out some kind of fear and ignorance to the public."

"There are serious concessions on the table and (the city) basically wants to roll back everything we've worked for and bargained in the past."

Like what, Pellman wants to know.

"Seniority. That is a major, major issue and that is my major concern," said Rose, who has worked 15 years for the city.

With little public information on collective bargaining talks, Rose's interpretation is this: The city wants to remove seniority for some full-time workers, meaning they may not automatically be able to bump a more junior employee.

"In other words, they want to take that safety net out," Rose said. "If your position is deleted ... you're out of a job. You're gone."

Pellman nodded. "I hear you."

She then quickly picks up on Rose's fear for "seasonal" workers who, like partner Sharon, whom Rose recently married, may lose the right to pick jobs and shifts that are more convenient than others.

"So a lot of choice would be taken away," Pellman concluded.

"Which is scary," said Rose. "That puts you in a very vulnerable position of basically being out of a job."

Okay, now the good stuff. The stuff that outrages people on the outside looking in: Those 18 paid sick days. Striking workers get them annually, can bank the unused ones and cash them out down the road.

Pellman, who had a long career in insurance but has never been in a union, sees the paid sick time as a luxury in today's pared-down, melted-down workforce.

"A lot of people are saying 'Why the heck are you out over that?'"

Rose gives an unexpected, impassioned answer.

"As far as I'm concerned, that sick time is totally negotiable," the exasperated parks worker said.

"That is not the reason we're out here. If it was this wouldn't be happening right now. You wouldn't have garbage in your backyard."

The garbage. The locked public washrooms in parks. The closed pools. The spiked day camps. Pellman wants Rose to know she's angry the strike is hitting families "who can least afford" to pay for summer child-care alternatives.

"They are really caught in the middle so I feel with all due respect, Susan, that this is a little bit of holding the city hostage," said Pellman, who regularly takes her two grandchildren to play in city parks.

"What about the people who have paid for their kids' (city-run) day camps? I feel upset for people who can't put their kids in the car and go to the cottage or put their kids in private daycare or put their kids in a private camp. They are s--- out of luck and that upsets me."

Rose added the heavy pesticide use was another blight on parks used as trash depots.

"I'm worried about the kids and the dogs," she said.

Unlike the strike's early days when picketers and residents screamed at each other at dump sites, no such anger flared during the women's half-hour sidewalk chat. Firm opinions, yes. Name calling, no. Very courteous, very disciplined, very Toronto, really.

And what did each woman get out of their mini town-hall debate?

"Do I understand her aggravation? Yes, I'd be pissed if I were her," Rose said.

Pellman now knows the workers' issues are deeper than those 18 paid sick days.

"I'm all for people being taken care of properly," she said.

So, how did they leave it? As only dog lovers can – knowing they'll see one another again on their common ground.

"Can I still come over and say hello to Clover?" Rose asks.

"Of course you can, Susan. I don't have a problem with you."