

Trash talk obscuring strike's real toll

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When 30,000 Toronto city workers enter Week 5 of a municipal strike, one can expect at least some of the following:

- Unemployed residents can't access relief through the welfare system because social services workers are walking the picket lines instead of processing applications for welfare payments.
- The head of infection control at Mount Sinai Hospital, unencumbered by the politics of managing public opinion, says more Torontonians will die from swine flu because 1,800 health department workers are on strike.
- National newsmagazine *Maclean's* publishes a cover story with the mayor propped in a garbage can, banana peel on head, and the headline "Toronto Stinks."
- The bad press goes international as CNN shows the world a Toronto mayor disconnected from the reality of the public relations and tourism disaster that attracted the television station.
- Tempers are tested as garbage piles up, the stench fills the air and rats multiply.
- A citizen dies while waiting for an ambulance and there's speculation that a slowed response time brought on by the strike contributed to the delay.

Toronto has seen all of the above, entering Day 30, with no end in sight. So, what now?

The city can survive more of the same, but not indefinitely. Soon, city and provincial officials will be seeking an exit strategy to return the city to normal. And they'll wake up to the argument that the strike is bad for our health.

Apparently, we're not there yet.

At the first sign of economic distress – a day or two into a transit strike, for example – the province is quick to act and legislate the strikers back to work. Commerce cannot be allowed to grind to a halt. But early health warnings and signs of potential loss of human life don't rate similar quick action. For that to happen, we probably need evidence of bodies piled up because of the H1N1 virus.

It's not that provincial politicians are derelict. In fact, they accurately reflect our priorities.

The *Star's* headline on Saturday probably underplayed the seriousness of the matter. Flu expert Dr. Allison McGeer isn't saying that if the strike drags on further, people will be at greater risk from H1N1. She's saying even if the strike ended today, the death toll will be higher than it should have been.

"The bottom line is, more people will die," says the Mount Sinai microbiologist. While city officials tried to downplay the threat, she stood firm in an interview with the *Star's* Theresa Boyle.

"We are already in trouble. Now we've got 26 days (make that 30) of work that hasn't been done" in planning for the flu outbreak expected this fall, McGeer said.

Doctors, nurses and public health workers are on the picket line instead of scrupulously planning for the spread and severity of the virus, following up on leads and organizing vaccination clinics and flu centres city-wide.

While we focus on the garbage piled up in arenas, parks and parking lots, the real human toll of the strike goes unheeded.

Ambulance service has been cut back 25 per cent – that's the extent of the legal strike action they can take. Why emergency personnel are among the striking workers is beyond comprehension. They should have essential service classification, just like police and fire.

By fall, with the health effects of the strike more apparent, we might be wondering why we so devalued the work of the city's 1,800 public health staff.

Premier Dalton McGuinty may soon face questions on when he'll legislate the strikers back to work. Answers likely rest with the health workers.

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