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A trashman pays the price Testament to the dangers of garbage collection

By [JOE WARMINGTON](#)

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Ever since a rat defecated on a garbage bag, it has been a dark few years for Jake Roncetti.

Literally.

"It is so painful I have to stay in the basement sometimes because of the pain," he said yesterday. "It's like somebody hit me in the head with a shovel."

His "so-supportive" wife of 38 years, Melody, calls it The Cave.

It's often the only place where Jake can hide from the horrors of his post-listeria infection.

There's something about having both eyes sprayed with rat feces that causes sunlight on a bright day to become sharp pain that travels from the pupils to his feet.

"It's brutal," says the 59-year-old Port Perry resident. "You feel it everywhere."

He said it is a "constant battle" to get through each day and wouldn't wish it upon anybody.

Jake had a question for writers like me who have been so critical of the striking garbage workers.

"Do you realize the danger of some of these jobs?" he said.

Jake knows. He contracted listeria directly from a garbage bag.

It was one of the risks of being a garbage collector, first for the city of Scarborough and later in the amalgamated megacity.

"It was Nov. 29, 2002," he said. "My life has never been the same since."

He just grabbed garbage from a curb and threw it into the truck.

"There was something on the bag and it flew off the bag and splashed in both eyes," he said.

He kept working.

"I didn't think anything of it."

Later, both eyes were swollen.

"I looked like a wolf."

It was just the beginning.

The swelling didn't go down.

"Within two weeks I started to shake like a jack hammer," he said.

Finally, infectious disease experts determined he had listeria -- directly from the waste of that rat.

"You see, first the racoons rip open the bags and then the birds get in there and not long after, the rats," he said.

It's the kind of risk garbage collectors face.

He is on long-term disability and paid by Workers Compensation.

"I wish I could work. I did try to go back twice but I couldn't handle it," he said. "I'm watching all of my former colleagues involved in this strike and am feeling for them because the whole story is not getting out there."

He walked the picket line with them for one day in solidarity. "I was CUPE 416 and I did every job there is for the city for 28 years -- the roads, the parks, the sewers and garbage collection -- and I know it's not easy," Jake said. "None of those jobs are a picnic."

People are "painting everybody with the same brush."

"These are very good, hard working people involved in this."

I deal with people who do dangerous jobs all the time, including soldiers in Afghanistan, cops, paramedics and firefighters.

I respect them all, but if any of them were to go on strike during a recession, leaving tax-paying families without day care, summer camp, swimming, garbage collection and Canada Day, I would criticize them.

It doesn't mean I wouldn't still love them.

I just love my city more.

As for the city and union, Jake tells me his prescription plan is cut off because of the strike.

He's not complaining -- but I figure that's another reason to get this strike settled soon.

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