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Terence Corcoran: Toronto strike a union-made disaster

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Comment by Terry Corcoran

The cover of Maclean's Ontario edition this week features Toronto Mayor David Miller. He's sitting in a garbage can with a banana peel on his head, surrounded by trash and a pair of raccoons ready to nibble on the mayor's rotting political tootsies — a not-so subtle homage to Mr. Miller's assumed role, as a union-friendly lefty, in plunging Canada's largest city into a prolonged garbage strike.



Turning on Mr. Miller is the thing to do these days in Toronto, where the city's business and political elites — Liberal and Conservative — are reportedly ready to galvanize around an anybody-but-Miller campaign for the 2010 city elections. The Maclean's cover plays right into the dump Miller movement.

Below a stunned-looking Mr. Miller, a slip of banana peel rakishly crossing his forehead, is the headline: "TORONTO STINKS: Skyrocketing costs, soaring taxes. Now a summer garbage strike. How Canada's biggest city got itself into this mess." By implication, the mayor did it.

On one level, personalizing Toronto's civic workers' strike as a Miller problem may work in getting rid of David Miller. He certainly seems to have brought this on himself. During his period in office since 2003, he deliberately pushed the city deeper into debt and into greater union dependence.

But in the real political power struggle for control of Toronto, and of cities across Canada, great mayor-bashing campaigns will likely prove to be a bust for taxpayers and the governance of Canadian cities. If Mr. Miller's been a problem, so has every mayor the city has had over the last two decades. And the way this garbage strike is going, so will every mayor the city gets over the next two decades.

This is a union-created disaster, not strictly a Miller disaster. Mayor-bashing leads nowhere in these circumstances. All it does is reinforce the internal and external power of the people who are at the heart of urban fiscal and structural problems — the walled city of union power and union leaders who, time and time again over the years, have brought local politicians to their knees.

While the mayor goes down in the media and with the public, union leaders chug relatively unscathed through their ritual assaults on taxpayers, good sense and rationality. Mark Ferguson, head of Toronto Local 416 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees — which represents garbage and other outside workers — turned up in a weekend *Toronto Star* profile as soft-hearted New Wave mystic. He reads works by the Dalai Lama and allegedly seeks to avoid confrontation in favour of fairness.

What Mr. Ferguson also reads, however, is the same old union class-warfare texts that have animated union power for a century. In response to an angry Toronto taxpayer about the garbage strike, Mr. Ferguson fired off a typical leftist diversion. "Perhaps you might direct your anger towards the banks, financiers and Wall Street rather than cannibalizing gains made by other working people." That's the union way: When the going gets rough, haul out Wall Street bankers and financiers, whatever their total irrelevance to anything at hand, and leave your audience dumbfounded — or, if they are already onside, nodding in agreement.

Labour union management is mostly performance art, a schtick grounded in elaborate ideological deceptions. A union boss, in full stand-up routine, follows pre-scripted lines of attack using the lowest techniques: ad hominem, neo-Marxist class warfare stereotypes, non-sequiturs, outright fabrications.

Ferguson's boss, national CUPE president Paul Moist, spends his life shambling across Canada from city to city, reinforcing the idea that city government would fall apart without CUPE and its notorious closed shops,

featherbedding, benefit-laden contracts and iron-clad control over service delivery. This week he's working against Winnipeg's water restructuring scheme. His members are still paralyzing the city of Windsor's operations after three months.

A few weeks ago, during a CBC Radio debate, Mr. Moist came to the defence of his Toronto locals. Toronto workers were right to strike, he said, because "our members cannot accept that [Toronto] council voted themselves a raise three or four months ago and now claim the cupboard is bare." While council behavior might be frustrating and even duplicitous, that doesn't give workers a blank cheque to hold taxpayers hostage with a strike. If the workers don't like council members, they can vote like everyone else. It's not a contract issue. Many of those council members also owe their council seats to union backing.

The union has also stuck to its various absurdist claims about Toronto's sick leave benefit. Moist and Ferguson dismiss it as just a normal "severance" package. "In the private sector," said Moist, "forms of severance exist in recognition of people who spend a career with an employer." Actually, severance is normally paid to people who are fired, but no CUPE worker can be fired, contracted out or even laid off.

Like all union leaders, CUPE chiefs just make stuff up. The sick leave unfunded liability, estimated at \$140-million for the striking workers, is said to be an "accounting fantasy." Unions always say things like that about unfunded liabilities. The auto workers dismissed their unfunded pension liability as a non-problem until their pensions couldn't be paid; then they blamed management for failing to properly manage the company and the liability, for which they should have prepared. While Miller is being hanged, the union operatives are getting away with murder. There is no winning against union arguments. Anyone who gets into a debate with union brass risks a mean personal battle. As part of the CBC Radio debate over the Toronto strike, Jim Stanford of the Canadian Auto Workers lit into Catherine Swift of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business with a typical ad hominem. "She makes five or six times as much money as the people on the picket lines, but she's still pointing the finger."

With mean-spirited class warfare on their side, the union is winning the battle. The worse the mayor and city hall look in public opinion, the more CUPE can count on a city capitulation to union preferences.

Eventually, the strike will end and Toronto CUPE members will return to work and the garbage will be picked up again. In the end, even if Mr. Miller is gone, nothing will have been done to rewrite Toronto's dismal union-dominated financial outlook. But CUPE's Paul Moist — who should have been the Maclean's cover story this week — will still be around, doing his schtick.

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