



*After only a week, the festering Christie Pits trash mountain is already daunting.*

*R. Jeanette Martin*

## **Dump sight**

Strike opens our eyes to the awful levels of waste we produce

Mike Smith

They call it a work stoppage, but almost anyone can take it as an excuse to slow down and think.

At a local café, I drink coffee that's arrived here in bean form from afar on a huge metal bird; I finish and put my cup in a bin, having no need ever to think of it again. It will simply... disappear.

Except, this time, it doesn't. The cups, the wrappers, the refuse – the things we've been refusing to think about – sit there, reminding us that there are many wizards who work this magic for us, often behind the curtain of night. The breakdown of a machine proves the best way to observe how it works.

Imagine no garbage collectors or daycare workers – ah, but we don't have to imagine. Apparently, we'd soon be swimming in the stench of rinds and babies.

Maintenance work “makes all other work possible,” said critic Helen Molesworth, reviewing Mierle Laderman Ukeles's Maintenance Art (credit to [Leah Sandals's blog](#) for reminding me of her). Yet relative to others in the pyramid, we give these workers little remuneration and less respect.

Certainly, there are arguments to be made that services cost too much – at least if we look for the “cost drivers” (to use the bureaucratese) in ourselves first, before wages. Don't like being “held hostage” by garbage collectors? Stop making so much damn garbage.

But even now, striking, garbage collectors are providing a sort of public service. As trash mounds grow in the rinks and pools of local parks, we are faced (nosed, specifically) with the reality of how much we throw away and the lives we lead in pursuit of the privilege to do so.

As I write this, word goes out: residents are gathering to block the Christie Pits dump. Despite their efforts, that site may be full by the time you read this – after less than a week. It's disgusting. It'll be no

less disgusting once the trash is invisible again.

And yet there's a poetry to parks being chosen as dumps, a chance to see how connected things are.

Other linkages are less obvious. It turns out that the part-time seasonal outside workers in Local 416 – 1,400, nearly a quarter of all members – don't get any sick days at all, let alone the right to bank them. Nearly 9,000 of CUPE 79's members – about half – are part-time and in the same boat.

Most staff are reluctant to talk on record, but word from a few sources at various rungs is that benefits aren't even the issue now; 416 will settle for not losing already scant hours and being able to stay in one place rather than being moved around weekly as managers see fit.

This is a residents' issue as well. If we want quality services, then let's ask ourselves if we don't really mean quality relationships. So long as the Esteemed Member from Blind Outrage has the floor, most of the talk is about how to most quickly shrink services, send strikers to work camps and privatize the wreckage.

But what if it's not bloat but blockage that ails us? Some of the most "innovative" (I'm careful with the word now because it's so linked with "flexibility" and "efficiency") city-building is being done in parks: experiments in community governance at Dufferin Grove, new community garden plots that just broke earth at Christie Pits, farmers' markets across Toronto.

If, for just one instance, front-line parks workers – the ones with the dirt under their fingernails – were given more hours, wages, resources and the right to stick around and build relationships with locals on particular projects, we might find that supporting workers isn't a block to efficiency but a way toward it.

One suggestion? Community and backyard composters instead of labour-intensive green bins that produce no food-grade topsoil. Hey, there goes most of your garbage.

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