

Three days in, our survival skills at their limit

CHRISTIE BLATCHFORD

Last updated on Saturday, Jun. 27, 2009 05:18AM EDT

Personally, I long for the infestation of rats. My dream is that they will eat all the ninnies.

The infestation hasn't happened yet, of course, though you'd never know it if you were visiting Toronto this week. Half the city hadn't even missed its first regularly scheduled garbage pickup and the streets were clogged with the other half shrieking about the threat to public health. And this, mind you, in a city where rat is occasionally in the restaurant window and on the menu in some parts of town, if mostly by accident.

By day *three* of the strike by 24,000 city workers, including garbage collectors, one of the Toronto papers was running a little strike-related feature entitled "Feeling the stress" with accompanying pictures of people looking hot, inconvenienced and rat-obsessed.

Who feels stressed out on the third day of any strike, you might well ask?

Torontonians, that's who. This is the city that once called in Canadian Forces to shovel the snow. We here are not known, shall we say, for our survival skills. My own view is that the flying squads of psychologists will be in by week's end, diverted from the schools, where they routinely descend at even the prospect of harsh words.

The city government is handling the strike in malevolent nanny-state fashion.

At its direction, Torontonians were directed in advance of the strike to drop their garbage at a couple of transfer stations, this well before anyone could have possibly accumulated any real amount of it. When, on Monday, folks did what they were told and arrived at said stations, unsurprisingly since it is a strike they were greeted by pickets who wouldn't let them through the lines.

Some people dropped the garbage on the spot, others sneaked into a few city parks in the dark of night to leave theirs, but Mayor David Miller promptly fixed their wagons by dispatching his inspectors to the transfer stations to give out \$380 tickets for illegal dumping. Those who "witness" such dumping are now being asked to call a snitch line, complete with licence plates of the offenders. Toronto always has time and money enough to pay people to operate snitch lines.

The real hot-button issue, certainly the one infuriating taxpayers suffering in this hideous recession, are the "sick day" provisions of the city's collective agreements, negotiated decades ago with two locals of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, which see workers allowed to bank 18 days of sick leave a year and accumulate up to six months' pay over a lifetime.

It's a rich-seeming perquisite for union members who, particularly in a lousy economy where plenty of people are out of work, are pretty richly rewarded - at the top of the scale, garbage collectors get \$25.01 an hour, receptionists \$23.70, cleaners \$21.30, etc.

And it's true that, even at the best of times, Torontonians have a querulous relationship with some of their public servants. Just about everyone I know, for instance, has had the experience of having garbage rejected by the garbage guys - either it wasn't beautifully enough wrapped, or it was too heavy, or it was put out on the wrong day (just reading our garbage-day calendars is daunting).

Once this year, my freeloading boarder Al Strachan was home alone when the truck pulled up out front. Not having read the calendar properly, I'd left out a couple of those old fluorescent tubes from the basement. According to Strach, by the reaction of the garbage men, you would have thought they'd come across a glowing pile of nuclear waste: They were all hopping mad and squealing about health hazards.

"Well," I told him later, "they are *Toronto* garbage men," meaning they have acquired delicacy syndrome, like everyone who lives here.

But it underscores a point that a friend of mine made the other day about a judge he knows. Upon his ascension to the bench, the judge told the story of how when he was a teenager, working as a landscaper, one of his elderly relatives took him aside and suggested he go back to school. When he asked why, she said, "Honey, there are inside jobs, and outside jobs. You have an outside job." So the man went to law school and ultimately, as he said, ended up with one of the best inside jobs there is.

That's the thing about many of the city workers, particularly the 6,000 from Local 416: They do the hard, physical, outside jobs that a lot of people wouldn't want. That ought to count for something.

The truth is, it's not really the workers who strain the patience of Toronto taxpayers, but rather the municipal bureaucracy - all those rules and regulations, the Byzantine processes, the permits and bylaws that are the bane of all of our lives - and the dysfunctional and inept city council. The politicians, who just recently voted themselves a little raise, are merely embarrassing, and the bureaucrats (management, for the purposes of this discussion) are the ones who are really well-fed.

Just check out the so-called "Sunshine list" of municipal government employees who last year earned more than \$100,000. They sure aren't the guys collecting the garbage or cleaning the streets, but rather the dozens of folks it seems are required to manage them.

On the 2007 list, for example, I counted four "repair supervisors" earning between \$168,000 and \$191,102 a year, and three street-cleaning supervisors earning about the same.

In the words of my friend Tracy Nesdoly, whom I quote several times a year saying this, "You have to know who to be mad at." And in this case, it isn't the workers.

In the broadest strokes, I have to agree with CUPE Ontario president Sid Ryan, who made a ringing speech (those damn Irishmen) at a rally at City Hall yesterday. "Today, they ask 'Why do you have sick time?' " he said.

"Tomorrow, they'll ask, 'Why do you still have defined benefit plans?' " In other words, in government and in the private sector both, companies are using the guise of the recession to try to strip away benefits.

Finally, a bit of a confession.

I have had some fine sunshine streaming out my rear quarters most of my professional life, as I realized last weekend when I had occasion to attend my first union meeting and cast my ballot in a strike vote for the first time.

I will not bore you with details, but suffice to say that as of June 30, The Globe and Mail and members of the Southern Ontario Newspaper Guild (the union which represents, among others, the journalists) could be on the brink of a lockout or a strike.

Though colleagues and friends have walked a picket line before, through sheer luck and good timing, I've never even had to contemplate the possibility. I find it clarifies your thinking.