

## The sweet smell of summer garbage

In Toronto, it can be hard to tell the difference between a garbage strike and any other time: Customer focus isn't a big aim of garbage collection, and neither is efficiency or cost

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Is your garbage getting smelly? Are you plagued by the aroma of old shrimp shells and unfresh kitty litter wafting in the breeze on a hot summer day? Well, here's a helpful tip from City Hall: Freeze it. Just don't mistake it for meat balls later on.

It's plain to see why the rest of Canada envies Toronto. Our civic leaders are always working tirelessly on our behalf. If we've got to have a garbage strike, they don't want us to suffer.

Mind you, it's sometimes hard to tell the difference between a garbage strike and any other time. For years, our porch has been a little slice of Dogpatch - piled high with stuff the garbage men won't deign to remove until the appointed day.

Did you miss that day by mistake? Too bad. You'll have a month's worth by the time they take it. Getting rid of garbage in this city is so stressful that I can't see how a strike will make matters much worse.

In recent years, the garbage czars at City Hall have cut back service, imposed ever-changing rules for recycling, slapped on new collection fees, devised an alternating schedule nobody can remember, imposed strict household quotas, charged us for decent-sized bins and told us how much better off we are.

They have also turned garbage workers into vigilantes, a role they appear to embrace with relish. There's nothing like having your garbage rejected for obscure technical violations. One friend's green bin was rejected because it was unlatched.

"Now I get it," I told my husband. "They don't work for us. We work for them."

In Toronto, "customer focus" is not a big aim of garbage collection. Neither is efficiency or cost. The garbage workers are on strike to protect perks that include the notorious sick bank - 18 () paid sick days a year, which can be worth up to six months' salary and cashed in before they retire. Only in the public sector can you get a generous bonus just for showing up.

David Miller, the mayor, blames the striking workers for being out of touch. Don't they know the whole world has collapsed? Don't they know the city's revenues have crashed while welfare rolls have soared? Garbage workers don't realize that we all have to make a sacrifice.

But maybe it's the mayor who's out of touch. Other cities moved long ago to get rid of perks like sick-bank plans, which were (and are) frequently abused. Not Toronto, where the unfunded liability for the sick bank has reached \$186-million. Nor did the word "sacrifice" have much resonance back in April, when the mayor approved those healthy wage hikes for city councillors. The city's finances have been in rocky shape for years, which didn't stop the mayor from larding on another 1,400 people to the payroll this spring. In the past two years, city spending has risen by nearly a billion dollars.

The last garbage strike we had was back in 2002. They had to settle fast, because the Pope was coming to town and piles of rotting garbage would have looked bad on world TV. This year, there's no Pope. The city is a lot more broke, and the garbage workers' union is about as popular as cockroaches in the kitchen. So I think it might drag on.

I'm not worried though. Last week, we moved into a condo. Guess what? They have private garbage collection. We can throw away all our garbage *any time we want*, and nobody hassles us. No one throws our bins in the middle of the driveway, or drives sneeringly away as I rush after them in my nightie with my bag of dripping goo. The mayor says private garbage collection is very bad, but I forget exactly why. Sometimes, we throw out our garbage three times a day, just because we can.

Naturally, our friends are sick with envy. We tell them that if they're super nice, we'll smuggle in their frozen cat litter and dump it down the chute.