

Just hold your noses and think of Canada

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Former U.S. ambassador to Canada James Blanchard wrote in his book *Behind the Embassy Door* that many believe that what keeps Canada together is that "everyone hates Ontario. And what keeps Ontario together is that everyone hates Toronto." So if everybody is happy because Toronto is going to be submerged by tons of stinky garbage in the middle of a hot summer, don't worry – it helps to keep Canada together.

I don't like generalizations, but there is some truth to this. And the reason is, I guess, that Torontonians give the impression of behaving as if they are Ontario, while Ontarians believe that they are Canada.

But considering that I live in Mississauga, and I should be one of the Ontarians hated by the rest of the country, and should join them in their hatred of Toronto, I'll try to keep Blanchard's statements in mind and concentrate strictly on the smelly issue: the strike.

If I understand correctly, there are two major points of disagreement on the table, namely the salary increase of 3 per cent and the sick day benefits.

Let's take a look at both of them.

There is an unwritten rule for Toronto employees that every year, come hell or high water, their salary should be increased by 3 per cent. The fact that we are in the middle of the worst recession since the '30s means nothing. Police and TTC employees got 3 per cent and city employees want it, too. This reminds me of the kindergarten attitude that I'm fine without a candy as long as Mark doesn't get one either.

The fact that police officers and TTC workers renewed their contracts before the recession hit us carries no weight in the municipal workers' discussions. I understand that a three-year contract will extend the impact into the post-recession period. But that's life; or do they believe that the city should reopen the negotiations with the police and the TTC to adapt them to the new economic reality? Would giving less money to their colleagues make them feel better?

By the way, if they want so much to be like others, do they know that in other cities the "institutional" increase of 3 per cent is not even an unwritten rule and negotiations hinge on the now-obsolete concept that we only spend money that we have?

During contract negotiations, it is assumed that unions try to get as much as they can from the filthy capitalists who are trying to take advantage of the working people. Well, this concept doesn't apply to this negotiation. There are no capitalists to tame but a socialist mayor who is, finally, trying to defend the interests of millions of other workers – citizens – many of whom don't have a salary at all.

Then we have the issue of sick days. This is another union myth. It is not that they want to be paid when they are sick – they get that already, and it's not being challenged. The sticking point is – listen to this – they want to keep being paid more because they are *not* sick. Basically, if they don't use the sick days – because they are not sick – they want the city to pay those days to them when they retire. This is a commitment that could cost the citizens of Toronto about \$250 million (including all employees, not just those on strike).

I'm sure that many companies are taking advantage of the current economic situation to get rid of many good workers and, at times, of unions altogether.

This is not the case with Toronto's government, which has always been very generous with its unions. But this is the core of the issue. Unions, accustomed to getting what they want from the city, thought they could win this fight as well. I believe that with some warnings and prep-work in the past months from Mayor David Miller, we

wouldn't now be dealing with this smelly issue.

I know that the longer the strike goes on in Toronto, the better the rest of country will feel and we will become more united. Still, at the risk of splitting the country, for now I'll plug my nose and stand in solidarity with the citizens of Toronto.

Angelo Persichilli is the political editor of Corriere Canadese. His column appears Sunday.