

Three killed by snow plows in Montreal: privatization to blame

Éric Marquis
19 February 2009

On a single day at the beginning of this month, three people in Montreal died after being struck by snow plows. The deaths are the product of the municipal government's partial privatization of snow removal and the heavy demands placed on subcontract workers.

Under pressure from city authorities to meet snow removal targets, the private companies in the City of Montreal's employ have adopted practices that threaten the security of citizens and snow plow drivers. Municipal authorities have looked the other way despite a mounting tally of accidents and fatalities.

On February 3 an elderly couple crossing an intersection was run over by a snow plow in the process of cutting a corner. The man was killed upon impact, while the woman died a few hours later after being hospitalized. Later the same day, a 76-year-old woman was struck by another snow plow in similar circumstances. In both instances, the victims had the right-of-way over any vehicles. The two truck drivers implicated in the accidents confirmed, in shock, that they had not even seen the pedestrians crossing.

Last December a woman was struck and killed by a road grader. In 2005, snow removal operations in Montreal killed two people. In all of these accidents, the heavy machinery was under the control of private companies contracted by the municipal government.

For almost half of its snow removal operations, the City of Montreal relies upon subcontracted companies; the other half is accomplished by its own workers. The transport of snow away from the city, however, is almost entirely in private hands. Whereas the city workers are paid an hourly wage, the private contractors are paid piece-work, by volume of snow removed. Local municipal authorities can levy fines of up to \$10,000 upon the subcontractors if they don't

meet snow removal targets.

François Pilon, owner of a snow removal company in the Côte-des-Neiges neighbourhood, deals with independent truck drivers who own their own plows. These drivers often must work for several companies in order to pay for and maintain their vehicles, which can cost them \$2,500 to \$3,000 a month.

In this context, the independent truck drivers are pushed to work an irrational number of hours, potentially placing their lives and the lives of others in danger. The laws that limit the total number of hours on the road for any operator of a heavy vehicle in Quebec leave room for the most egregious exploitation. They allow for truck drivers to log up to 70 hours of driving a week, and up to 13 hours a day.

From the statements given by many drivers to the press, it would appear these limits are often broken in the case of snow removal operations and this for two reasons. The subcontractors are determined to escape the penalties for failing to meet their snow removal targets and the drivers, who receive little if any pay when there is no snow to clear, are compelled to try to maximize their earnings when work is available.

An independent snow plow driver told the *Journal de Montréal*, under cover of anonymity, that he had slept only six hours over the course of the previous four days. The truckers use their breaks and their lunches to catch whatever minutes of sleep they can.

According to Pilon, at times the truck drivers work 24 and even 36 hours straight. An inspector for the provincial Ministry of Transport confirmed that it was not rare to find on the dashboard of private snow plows caffeine pills and other stimulants used to stay awake.

The first accident on February 3 happened at 9:40 AM. The truck driver had started his shift at 8:00 PM the night before. In another recent accident, in Lévis

near Quebec City, a young snow plow driver collided with another vehicle. It was his twelfth straight hour of driving.

The government's response to this disconcerting situation has been to reduce its regulatory mechanisms. Before the three deaths occurred, Quebec's Ministry of Transport was set to issue a directive that would have removed the right of its regulators to control vehicles dedicated to snow removal and ice melting. These regulations, said a Ministry report, "...on occasion can compromise the efficiency of snow removal operations," which must "...be carried out as quickly as possible in order to assure public security."

After the tragic deaths at the start of this month, this directive was unceremoniously dropped. But the city of Montreal has refused to make any changes to its snow removal practices, saying it must await the outcome of a public inquiry. Mayor Gérald Tremblay condescendingly cautioned pedestrians: "Make sure to cross the street at intersections and to make eye contact with drivers."

His comments call to mind the cynical words of Marcel Tremblay, the mayor's brother and the former member of the executive committee in charge of citizen services. Reacting to the popular furor over the city's failure to remove snow and ice from the city's streets and sidewalks in a timely fashion, Marcel Tremblay declared, "Without spending a fortune people can buy crampons for snow or ice. Why aren't they buying them?"



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact