

Toronto mayor risks public's health in city workers strike

A WSWS reporting team
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Angry residents of the working-class neighbourhood of Christie Pits in west-central Toronto filed an official complaint with the Ontario Ministry of the Environment Thursday charging that the city administration is violating its own safety regulations in its campaign against striking municipal workers.

Egged on by the corporate media, which wants the city to impose sweeping contract concessions on the strikers, the city has transformed parts of 19 city parks, including Christie Pits, into garbage dumps for local residents to dispose of their household trash.

The Christie Pits residents charge that the temporary dump site is an environmental hazard to both people and animals. It is located immediately adjacent to a large city swimming pool (closed due to the strike) and baseball fields.

So as to prevent the rotting garbage from becoming a magnet for pests and disease, the city has been spraying the dumps with toxins, exchanging one hazard for another.

Six thousand inside workers, members of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 416, and 18,000 inside workers, represented by CUPE Local 79, walked off the job June 22 to oppose the city's attempt to cut their real wages, increase their workload, weaken seniority rights, eliminate a program that allows them to bank unused sick days, and impose fees on some other benefits.

The entire corporate and political establishment has supported the city's attack, calculating that a very public going of the city workers will facilitate their drive to impose concessions on all public sector workers and to slash the public and social services that they administer.

Predictably, officials from the provincial Liberal government were quick to dismiss yesterday's environmental complaint. Even before dispatching an inspector to the Christie Pits site, an official with the Environment Ministry said that the city was honouring all health regulations despite the spraying of rat poison and other toxins on the dump, the build up of contaminants in the refuse, and the proliferation of flies and other vermin.

After inspecting the site Thursday afternoon, Toronto's Officer of Health Dr. David McKeown urged picketing residents to desist from trying to prevent spraying of the dump site. "While I appreciate

there are concerns about the use of pesticides," said McKeown, "I am satisfied that the city is taking the necessary precautions to ensure pesticides are applied in a way that minimizes any risk to public health."

With the current 19 park dump sites rapidly filling up, city managers have drawn up a list of other parks for possible use as refuse dumps.

Pictures of the refuse dumps have figured large in the corporate media's aggressive campaign against the strike. This campaign has seen the modestly paid municipal workforce of a city that is home to Canada's financial elite pilloried on a daily basis for their "over-generous" benefits." "Toronto, the workers' paradise where nothing works," screamed the *National Post's* Kelly McParland in a comment posted Friday.

But it is the city that provoked the strike with its concession demands. Moreover, editorialists and commentators at the city's four dailies have repeatedly urged Mayor David Miller not to compromise on those demands, even if it means a protracted strike. "A back-to-work order now, or even in a week or two," declared the *Globe and Mail's* Marcus Gee last week, "would be wildly premature. Worse, it would ruin any chance of getting an affordable, lasting deal for Toronto."

The corporate media is indifferent to the hazards and hardships being caused to ordinary working people by the city-imposed disruption of municipal services. Along with the garbage that has begun to accrue on Toronto's streets and city parks, public health inspections of restaurants and of the water quality at local beaches has been suspended and other services including city-run daycares have been shut down.

That, of course, will not stop the media, when they deem it politic, to raise a hue and cry about how the strike is putting Torontonians' health at risk so as to justify the provincial government using emergency legislation to outlaw the strike. But they want such legislation to break with the recent precedent and effectively instruct the arbitrator to impose the city's concession demands.

The leadership of CUPE, meanwhile, is working to confine the Toronto city workers' struggle in the most narrow collective bargaining framework, refusing to make the strike a spearhead of a broader struggle against the attempt of big business to make working people pay for the economic crisis.

In a sure sign that it is eager to cut a deal with the city administration at the expense of the city workers, CUPE has not even spelled out all the concessions that the city is seeking.

Organized into the “Friends of Christie Pits,” local residents first raised their voices against the city’s plans even before the park dumps were opened. They have continued to organise against the defilement of their neighbourhood (and all others) over the past week.

A walk down quiet, residential Crawford Street that borders the park reveals well-kept, unassuming homes festooned with signs and banners demanding that the mayor respect the health concerns of the citizenry and close the park dumps. Neighbourhood groups in other dump locations have emulated this tactic and have also begun to organise.

A team of WSWs reporters visited several park dump sites over the past three days. At Christie Pits the stench of rotting refuse was clearly evident even hundreds of yards from the area. Fields usually populated by children playing soccer and baseball were empty due to the overpowering smell. Early on Thursday morning at Christie Pits, two rats were spotted by a reporter on the scene. City managers who have been dragooned into overseeing the dump sites as “Customer Service” agents told the WSWs that rat poison was being deployed in the park, and that a private contractor had been engaged to spray the area in an effort to keep down flies and other vermin.

WSWS reporters interviewed several residents at Christie Pits. Paul, a construction worker, said “Just take a deep breath. Look down there. Normally, you’d see all sorts of kids playing. People having picnics. Now it’s a wasteland. I went over to one of those city managers yesterday—the ones in the yellow jerseys saying “Customer Service” on them. That’s a laugh. I said to one of them what are they doing about the rats. The guy says don’t worry, we have rat poison. Beautiful! That’s a great advertisement for a park. I then said that the stink was totally unacceptable, and the other city manager there said, “Don’t worry. You’ll get used to it.” Unbelievable. The neighbourhood stinks to high heavens, and she’s telling me to get used to it.

“Where’s the newspaper headlines for crap like that? You see the papers trashing the strikers everyday. Like they’re public enemy number one. And this city manager is laughing at me, saying relax, you’ll get used to this shit. That should be the damn *Star* headline!”

The WSWs also spoke with Govin Rao. While Rao is a representative of the “Friends of Christie Pits,” he spoke to the WSWs only in a personal capacity.

“We’re doing a very good job of what you need during a strike. We’re focusing the attention on the city; we’re making it hard for them to open more and more temporary dumpsites, to constrain their ability to continue the strike.

“The problem,” continued Rao, “is with our group. As you can imagine...it’s got its left wing and its right wing. Most of the people in

the organization say we’re just not going to take a side. But, in protecting the park, you’re really taking a side and making it impossible for the city to pursue a long strike, because they’ve got nowhere else to put the garbage. Furthermore, if you look at everything that’s come out of us, there’s never been anything anti-union. I would like to make a more clear workers supporting institution, but the thing is, you make a very workers supportive statement, and you bring it in front of Friends of Christie Parks, well they say ‘what the hell is this, are you part of the union?’”

WSWS reporters have also visited several CUPE picket lines in recent days. At Old City Hall strikers warmly accepted the latest article from the web site “More establishment lies against striking Toronto City workers.”

Phil, an inside worker at Local 79 said, “I totally see what you’re saying about all these lies and bad press that we’re getting in the newspapers. All they’re doing is making us out to be greedy and selfish. I’m glad you are writing the truth about our fight. Just look at the *Toronto Sun* the other day. Writing about the cancelling of the Canada Day fireworks at Ashbridges Bay because of the strike. They’re setting us up like were enemies of the country when everybody knows that the city didn’t even bother approaching us about the festivities. We’re gonna go down there just to set the record straight. We’re just working people trying to keep above the water line.”

The WSWs also visited the Ingram garbage transfer station. The station is one of the main points where the city’s refuse is dumped, compacted and prepared for shipment out of the city. City residents have been dropping off their refuse at the stations over the past 12 days. Gabriella, a young striker told our reporters, “I think the city is taking too long to negotiate; they should be giving us equal rights compared to the rest of the other unions, like the (the workers at the) LCBO; they gave them what they wanted. The mayor’s not doing a good job. He’s always declared himself to be a friend of labour, except when it comes down to a real experience, and then we see what he really is. I think (taking cuts) in a recession is bullshit. They should be paying us more in order for us to buy the things that we need.”

The authors also recommend:

What is behind the media’s venomous attack on striking Toronto city workers?

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