

“The union is not being responsible to its members”

Interviews with striking Toronto municipal workers

A WSWWS reporting team
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Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* have been visiting picket lines and distributing political material since the beginning of the strike by 24,000 Toronto municipal workers. From the outset of the strike, union bureaucrats have insisted that workers refrain from sharing their thoughts on the dispute with the press.

This gag order has taken place under conditions in which the mainstream newspapers and talk radio hosts have launched a relentless barrage of vitriol, misinformation and outright anti-worker propaganda against the strikers. But as the strike has progressed, more and more workers have rejected their leadership's directives and spoken out, sometimes quite bitterly, about their experiences on the picket line.

A striking day care worker, who declined to give her name for fear of reprisal from the union, said, “This is a just cause we are fighting for. If the union leaders bothered about us at all, they would be campaigning tirelessly for our cause. We are asking for a small raise that is what everyone else is getting, including the elected officials who gave themselves a raise so that they now earn almost one hundred thousand dollars plus their expenses. We earn less than half of that. Some not even that. We are also asking to keep our sick day plan and even if we use some of those days at the end of our working lives to cash out, what's wrong with that? Every councillor and every private sector executive gets lovely packages, and they don't work near as hard as we do every day. We're also defending seniority rights. What in God's name is wrong with that? And yet we're tarred as terrible, grasping people.

“I just don't understand why our union doesn't wage a fight to get this out to people in Toronto. They are, by and large, fair-minded people. They work for a living too. But they are only hearing one side of the story because our union thinks everything revolves around today's or tomorrow's secret schemes at the bargaining table. I'm disgusted with our union. They should be ashamed of themselves.”

At City Hall, Camille, an inside worker said, “The union is not bothering to keep us informed. We are getting more and more demoralized. Just look around you. The picket lines are getting smaller. There are 600 people crossing the picket lines. The union is not being responsible to its members. If you leave them a note or a question, they do not get back to you. Go and look at their Web site. They don't even bother to update it. The newspapers

portray us as undeserving. Why isn't the union fighting back against this?”

Catherine, a cleaner, mentioned the front page coverage of a CEO with her 10 Bay Street colleagues who confronted City Hall picketers two weeks ago. “They're on the front page of all the papers and on every TV station for like two days. But nobody cares to say who they are. There's ten of them on their lunch hour from a Bay Street office and they're marching around like they're John Q. Public. But they get their press. What have our people done to get any kind of press? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. There's 24,000 strikers and another six thousand working 'cause they're graded essential. You add us all up, and with our families too. We should be having a 50,000-person demonstration. That would at least get us Page Two!”

In a city with its municipal services strikebound now for 36 days, there are other small vignettes that shed a clearer picture on the dynamics of the current dispute. When city managers in a pickup truck aided by a strike-breaker driving a large, mechanized street sweeper down a main Toronto thoroughfare on Thursday evening, two strikers intercepted the convoy and forced it to the side of the road. Bitterly denouncing the provocation, the strikers quickly drew a crowd of interested bystanders.

Frank McLain, a plumber, enjoying a beverage on a restaurant patio, said, “That street sweeper is not doing a thing except whipping up tensions. They can only properly clean a street late at night when you can't park your car on the sides. But this scab is driving around, cleaning nothing, in the middle of goddamn traffic. What's that all about? I know how management operates. I've been on strike myself. They just want to put on a show. Like everything's OK. Like its business as usual.” Paul, a waiter, joined in, “You know, I think I might just come out at quitting time and spread a bag or two of garbage in the gutter. They want people to think they're on the job. That it's not too bad. So, they can drag this thing out forever. That's bullshit. My kids can't even play in the park anymore 'cause of all the trash.”

To date, 26 city parks have been turned into temporary dump sites. Mountains of stinking trash, infested by rats and other vermin, doused by pesticides, and leaking all manner of noxious substances form the backdrop to playing fields, basketball courts and park-side homes across Toronto. Neighbourhood groups have sprung up to oppose the city's dumping strategy. Working people,

un-associated with the strike, have blocked pesticide trucks and chained themselves to park fences.

Charlene Endicott, a young mother watching her children play at Christie Pits Park (a temporary dump site) said, “Look at that grass. You don’t know what’s underneath there. Broken glass, condoms, who knows? I got to watch my kids like a hawk. They can’t even roll down the hill anymore.... I blame the mayor. He wants to put a scare into us ordinary folks. Like it’s wrong to ask for a raise every few years. Those bankers are getting millions. But we get nothing. Less than nothing.”

WSWS reporters visited strikers at the Ingram transfer station, where garbage collections are normally centralized, compressed and prepared for shipping. We spoke with Jill Smith, who after ascertaining that our reporters were not from the big business press, had a lot to say. The conversation, an important one, is reproduced here:

Jill: The union itself is not supporting its own workers.

WSWS: Have you seen your own leaders down on the picket line?

J: No.

WSWS: Do they give you any information?

J: No.

WSWS: Why do you think the union leaders have been behaving the way they have?

J: Personally, because I think that they may fear they’re losing the battle, so let’s hope it’s a case of losing the battle but winning the war.

WSWS: It would seem that there is a determination on the part of workers to win this battle, because this is not just a battle for the union, but a battle for the rights of working people here, for the rights of working people everywhere.

J: That is true.

WSWS: But if the union leaders have not mobilised to support this strike and to link up with other strikes such as Windsor, how do you explain that? I think they would rather see you demoralised about the strike and force you back to work.

J: Well unfortunately, I think the strikers might be forced to do that. People are panicking now, people only prepared financially for a couple of week’s worth of strike, and now it’s been a month or more. I think other striking workers are supporting the workers more than the unions are supporting the workers. I think here we’re building each other up; we’re coming up with our own conclusions.

WSWS: Do a lot of your co-workers share your views about the union leaders?

J: Oh yeah, definitely.

WSWS: So you think there’s a fairly widespread disappointment in how the union leaders have preformed?

J: Yes, I think that’s fair.

WSWS: What do you think about the fact that the union leaders supported David Miller in the last election?

W: We didn’t feel it was right for them to tell us who to support or vote for, so that was the contention right there. I think, for 416er’s and 79, we’ve learned a big thing now. We need to change the whole system. Instead of having two separate, we should have one together, a united front.

WSWS: Why do you think the union leaders don’t want that?

W: Well, they’re both getting separate money! They’re both being paid! You know how much it is, so why would they want that? Some of them would get booted out, and they don’t want that. They’ve established a certain rapport with the city, with other people, so they don’t want to change. Why would they want to change? Well, hopefully people will smarten up now and say, “You know what, we need to kick these people out and start something new.” I hate to say this, because I don’t know how it’s going to sound, but we need something with a more socialist kind of view, where it’s for everyone. Instead of everyone having their little separate unions all over the place, have one unified strength.

I will vote for anybody who is not a traditional person.

WSWS: Yeah, well this is a historic crossroads, and you know it’s not just about the rollbacks that workers are facing, it’s about the destruction of the environment, the threat of war. This is all a product of a bankrupt system, the profit system itself is at a dead end.

J: And in the past, how people solve this problem is that they have wars.

WSWS: Well that’s the solution that the capitalist system offers, war—destruction, death, poverty.

Another Striker added, “And right now they’re trying to destroy all unions because they don’t want the workers to have any power, so they want to destroy it little by little and if they win here with us, then it’s going to continue and continue and everyone’s going to be disadvantaged, and why should we have a union anyways when they can’t do anything for us? And that’s what they want; they want the little person not to have any power at all.”



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