

Who's keeping Toronto going?

Non-unionized workers endure 16-hour shifts, family stress in 'prison-like' environment to keep city going

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Susan hasn't seen her husband since the strike by Toronto's unionized municipal workers forced him and dozens of other managers to hunker down at the city's water supply and sewage-treatment plants, where they remain inside, 24 hours a day.



Workers unload bags of trash at the temporary dumpsite located at Christie Pits in Toronto.

They eat there, sleep on cots, do their own laundry and pull 16-hour shifts to make sure the city's toilets keep flushing and taps keep flowing. Videos, music and phone calls help break up the downtime in the prison-like environment, said Susan, who didn't want her real name used to protect her husband's job.

It is perhaps the most dramatic example of how the lives of Toronto's 4,000 non-union workers and managers have changed since the labour dispute shut down many city services June 22. Jobs have changed, hours are longer, and families are stressed – a tough pill to swallow for workers still smarting from this year's wage freeze and a 1-per-cent increase next year imposed on them by Mayor David Miller and city council.

“There's massive, significant disruption to people's lives, to our members' lives, in providing these services to keep this city functioning,” said Richard Majkot, executive director of their advocacy group, the City of Toronto Administrative, Professional, Supervisory Association Inc.

Everywhere you look, familiar faces are doing unfamiliar jobs. City clerk Ulli Watkiss, one of the most senior city bureaucrats whose salary topped \$207,000 last year, has been working in the mailroom at City Hall. Senior communications co-ordinator Steve Johnston was spotted hauling trash at a temporary dump. A manager of licensing and standards is now a dispatcher for animal control, planners are working in court services and other managers are cleaning shelters such as Seaton House.

Still, few have been asked to give more than senior staff at the city's eight water-filtration and wastewater-treatment plants. Apart from runs for food and supplies, the managers don't leave the facilities and aren't allowed to go home.

They are compensated well: Overtime is paid for any hours over a regular shift, and the eight-hour downtime is paid at regular salary, said Mr. Majkot. But it doesn't make up for what's missed at home, he said.

“This happened in 2002,” said Susan. “I didn't see my husband for over two weeks and we had a wedding anniversary and a holiday planned. You have to cancel all this stuff. Family is completely disturbed,” she said.

Susan said she's hopeful the city will allow for furloughs to give her husband and his colleagues a break.

Lou Di Gironimo, general manager of Toronto Water, declined to answer questions Thursday. He referred questions to city spokesman Rob Andrusovich, who refused to take questions on the lockdowns, staffing levels, compensation, or the potential for furloughs.

“The City of Toronto is ensuring that the water quality and the water systems and the sewage-treatment systems continue to work as they should,” Mr. Andrusevich said.

Water and sewage treatment is not considered an essential service under provincial labour-relations laws.