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## Toronto on Strike comment: Bring back garbage's glory days

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### By Lawrence Solomon

One month into Toronto's municipal strike marked by growing mounds of garbage, a majority of Torontonians — supported by some councillors — want the city to fire the striking garbage collectors and contract out garbage collection. Private contractors are unlikely to strike, they reason, and would also cost a lot less.

Those reasons are good and sufficient to can the striking workers, but hardly the only ones. Private service best protects the environment, best promotes an entrepreneurial economy and most contributes to the quality of life. Private service providers do so partly because they cost less, partly because they care more and entirely because they need to compete.

Garbage collection in cities ordinarily costs less than in the suburbs or rural areas because of the economies of scale that cities offer — in cities, garbage trucks have shorter distances to travel, saving time between pickup stops. By all rights, garbage collection should cost much less in Toronto.

Amazingly, Toronto's costs are higher than those of its lower-density neighbours — heaps higher. According to two Ontario Waste Management Association studies produced over the last decade, Toronto spends almost 30% more than the average of its neighbours to collect a ton of trash, and almost 60% more than its most efficient neighbour, Markham.

Why are Toronto's costs higher instead of lower than its neighbours? Salaries are one factor. Toronto's unionized work force averages more than \$30 per hour in wages and benefits, fully 50% higher than the private sector average. More important than the compensation, however, is the productivity of the workers. Private sector workers handle a staggering two-and-a-half to three times more waste per hour than Toronto's union workers. The private sector does this by working smarter and harder: Private managers tend to be cleverer at developing efficient routes and private workers tend to have more endurance because they are younger — 32 years old on average compared to 44 for city workers. As private sector workers age, private sector managers move them up and over to positions that are less physically challenging. In the city, with its dead end union positions, there's no place to move.

Residents of Toronto and other big cities pay the price directly for such inefficiency through their taxes, and they pay the price indirectly through garbage-driven policies that degrade the city environment in multiple ways. At one time, garbage collection was dominated by private firms that conscientiously picked up garbage directly from the homeowner's property, returning the bins to their allotted place without leaving litter behind on either street or sidewalk. Homeowner's weren't required to bring garbage to the curb, and pedestrians weren't confronted by noxious smells on their jog in the morning or their stroll the evening before.

In the name of cutting costs, cities turned sidewalks over to garbage processing, requiring garbage bins to be put out at the curb. To further cut costs, they then reduced the frequency of garbage pickups. To obtain economies of scale, they then super-sized the garbage trucks. To allow the super-sized garbage trucks to travel unencumbered, they required the street plans of new subdivisions to accommodate the turning radius of super-sized garbage trucks. Throughout it all, city amenities became progressively lost while the costs of garbage collection and disposal steadily rose. Along the way, we also lost the conservation ethic. Recycling once came naturally, now we have artificial one-size suits-all recycling systems that waste more resources than they save, and at great cost to the taxpayer. And we produce more garbage than ever before.

The attempt to salvage city-run garbage systems through ever-greater centralization continues today. To overcome the low productivity of the city's aging garbage workers, the city of Toronto now requires each household to use

uniform, city-supplied garbage bins that garbage trucks can lift for disposal. These ungainly bins — one for food wastes, one for garbage and one for recyclables — have become the chief aesthetic on front lawns and porches throughout the city. The sole relief from this aesthetic occurs on garbage day, when Toronto's workers leave the emptied bins strewn on sidewalks, creating a hardship for people in wheelchairs or mothers pushing baby strollers, and an eyesore for all.

Toronto's garbage strike creates hazards to the public health and inconvenience to all, but it does have some saving virtues. It highlights the self-centredness of the unions, which have again timed their strike for summer to maximize the fetidity of the garbage and the distress of the citizenry. And it reminds us of the resiliency in our society, through the entrepreneurship that instantly sprang up in response. Within hours of the strike's commencement, numerous providers emerged to offer garbage services at a reasonable price and, more importantly, with a smile. In my neighbourhood, Milton appears on request to remove my garbage for \$4 a bag. To save on fuel — a large factor for public and private haulers alike — Milton ferries garbage from his customers to his parked truck by a hand wagon. Every neighbourhood in Toronto now has its own Milton.

The polls don't ask the public if it would like a return of the personalized garbage services we once had but they should. With more Milton's cities would become more civil and more civilized.

• *Lawrence Solomon is executive director of Urban Renaissance Institute and Energy Probe, divisions of Energy Probe Research Foundation, and author of Toronto Sprawls (University of Toronto Press).*