

Toronto on strike: The great cleanup begins

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By Katherine Laidlaw

Street-sweepers, truck drivers and collectors transformed Chinatown and Kensington Market early Friday morning, doing away with mountains of rotting trash and restoring the streets to their usual appearance. By yesterday, as a man played a keyboard at Dundas Street W. and Spadina Avenue, merchants hawked vegetables in the sunshine. The stench of a 40-day garbage strike was gone at last.

“Oh my God, I can put my garbage in here!” Peter Baxter exclaimed as he tossed a Jamaican patty bag into an empty garbage bin in Kensington.

The city dispatched collectors charged with the unenviable task of emptying the 5,000 festering aluminum garbage bins at 12:01 a.m. yesterday, to clean up 40 days worth of trash as Toronto readies itself to return to normal in anticipation of council’s ratification vote.

The daunting clean-up began early Friday morning and by yesterday afternoon, neighbourhoods such as College Street’s Little Italy were clean as a whistle, with the mountains of garbage gone and only a smattering of cigarette butts littering the sidewalks.

The union charged its employees back to work yesterday ahead of city council’s approval of the contracts for 30,000 Local 416 and Local 79 workers. But the mood among some was less than pastoral.

“All this talk about all this f---ing money we’re making... it’s bullshit,” said one sanitation worker charged with tearing down posters on College Street. The father of two said he has worked for the city for six years as a casual employee, forced into unemployment in the winter because his contract ends and doesn’t begin again until the following spring each year. “You work six or seven months then you’re off on unemployment.” All the same, he said, he’s glad to be back to work. He said the public feedback he received in the neighbourhood was mostly positive. “Most people are nice. Some guy came by on his bike yelling, saying ‘I’ll never forgive you guys for going on strike!’”

Danya Euonastella, a server at neighbourhood hotspot Café Diplomatico, said she’s never been so excited to recycle a waterbottle as she was Friday at 1 a.m. when she finished her evening shift. “I was so surprised. When I left here around 1, I stuck my waterbottle in the garbage can and then realized it was open again,” she said. “Never did I see anyone come by. It was like magic.”

Of course, some neighbourhoods were luckier than others. Residents at Broadview Avenue and Dundas Street East faced bulging trash bins until mid-afternoon yesterday. Then salvation came. A sanitation worker wearing a facemask gingerly picked up bags of rancid milk, Chef Boyardee cans and Tim Horton iced cappuccino cups.

One street sweeper charged with cleaning up along Dundas Street East and Queen Street East, who gave his first name, Pat, said he had gone through about 50 bags just from sweeping along the sidewalks.

Pat stopped for a cigarette and waited for a truck to deliver more bags so he could continue. “I’m baking out here on this corner,” he said. Neighbourhood residents approached him and clapped him on the back, welcoming him



Photo: A city worker empties a garbage bin at Bathurst and Bloor on Friday. (Brett Gundlock/National Post)

back to work.

Jay, the tailor at Expert Repairs and Alterations on Augusta Avenue in Kensington, said that during the strike he, like many other business owners, emptied the public garbage can in front of his shop every day. “We took the bags to our apartment building in Etobicoke. It was messy, even the park over there [on Augusta], you couldn’t imagine how filthy it was.”

Yesterday, city workers came to collect the trash at 8 a.m. “I was so relieved,” he said.

Local 416 representatives have said the city’s temporary dump sites and parks won’t be cleaned until council votes in favour of the contracts.

The city declined to say how many staff were charged with yesterday’s clean-up, but said staff would be working into the weekend. The city and union have also said private contractors will be hired to clean up on Sunday.

Other city services resumed yesterday, including the city’s five golf courses,

Ferry service to Toronto Island started yesterday at a reduced schedule. By today, it’s expected to be running at its normal pace.

Curb-side garbage collection will start again on Tuesday and the city says that, for all of August, Toronto homeowners may put out as much garbage as they want, even if it does not fit in city-issued bins. The city will open its summer camps beginning on Aug. 10. The city clerk’s office, which issues marriage licences, birth and death registrations and liquor licences, also re-opened yesterday.

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klaidlaw@nationalpost.com