

Notes for Remarks by
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On the TTC Service Issues Controversy
February 9, 2010

I'm here to make a few comments on the recent avalanche of media-fuelled criticism aimed at TTC front line employees and to announce a union initiative around this issue.

First of all, I want to thank the members of the public who have been voicing support for our members out there. It's been expressed in many different ways but the general message has been: "Don't pay any attention to all this noise. Most of you folks are terrific and it's not fair that all of you are being blamed for the actions of a few."

We really appreciate those comments and of course I would encourage more of them.

But let me just briefly address another type of passenger. I know they're in a distinct minority and we have to put up with them all the time. But the recent media frenzy for "gotcha" pictures has brought more of these folks out of the woodwork. So let me speak directly to them:

Listen folks: Stop *harassing* people who are doing their jobs. Stop *insulting* them. Stop waving your phone cameras in their faces as you get on the bus or streetcar. Stop *spitting* on them. Stop calling them lazy and overpaid. Stop the video stalking of drivers when they stop for a washroom break. We're *entitled* to washroom breaks, like any human being should be. Harassing people about this by taking their pictures is an affront to human dignity and a violation of simple decency.

In Ontario, workers are entitled to a harassment-free workplace. And even though it is also a public space, a bus, a streetcar or a subway station is *our* workplace. The people who work there are human beings, just like you.

There is no group of workers in this city who are more subject to public assault than TTC workers. Every time there is a fare increase, we brace ourselves for the inevitable spike in insults and assaults. But the recent media focus on a handful of TTC workers has made a bad situation much, much worse.

We have heard from many operators who now fear taking a few minutes for a needed washroom break because they don't want to be subjected to ridicule or embarrassment. They don't want to appear on the front page, or on any page, of the Toronto Sun or the Toronto Star, or the National Post, on CITY-TV or Global or CTV or any of the other self-appointed guardians of the public good or the voice of the people.

I invite any journalist here today to go online and take a few minutes to research the health effects of chronic urinary retention. Let me give you a head start on the most common problems: urinary tract infections, kidney infections, kidney failure, bladder cancer and prostate problems.

So once again: to all those who get some cheap thrill video stalking a driver leaving his or her bus for a washroom break: *Stop it!* It's inhuman and it's creating potential employee health and public safety hazards.

And to the media who receive such videos, I'm asking you to send them back with a reprimand to the person who sent it. You are *not* performing a public service by publicizing the washroom breaks of public service workers.

And to Brad Ross, the TTC official who publicly declared that a washroom break should be announced to passengers and should only take three minutes, I say: "Who made you God? Who are you to determine how much time any man or any woman might need to answer a call of nature? Please explain to us where this standard comes from. And if you can't, please apologize to your employees for the needless anxiety and stress you have caused them."

Now I know all of this is about more than washroom breaks. There are the collectors who were recently shown napping on the job. There was a picture of a collector reading a newspaper. And there are plenty of anecdotes of rude or uncommunicative collectors and operators, although we always only have one side of those stories.

The union is *not* disputing that in a population of thousands of workers, you're going to find individuals who are a wee bit less than perfect some days, or some even a lot less than perfect. We're human beings and human beings have bad days. Maybe they're not feeling well. Maybe they've got family problems. Maybe the person just before you has insulted them and they haven't gotten over it right away. Or maybe they're not suited to this kind of work.

But as a union we have NEVER said that any TTC employee is entitled to nap on the job or has the right to be rude to customers. It happens, of course, and there is a process for dealing with these things. There *has to be* a process because things aren't always black and white, even when they might seem black and white to some people. People are entitled to defend themselves and tell their side of the story.

The grievance procedure is a process that both management and the union have agreed to. Every union, including the ATU, has a legal obligation to fairly represent its members. It's the law in Ontario. Now I don't need a law to tell me to defend my members. I'm just telling you that it *is* the law. Everyone who is accused of doing something wrong, and especially if their livelihood is at stake, is entitled to a fair and impartial hearing. And even if they are shown to have been in the wrong, the punishment must fit the crime.

Having said all that, I want to assure the public that the union takes all the criticism of our members very seriously and we want to do something significant to address it. But before I announce our plans, I want to make a couple of comments on the Saturday email from Chief General Manager Gary Webster.

This email was unfair in the extreme. Mr. Webster actually blames all employees - several times - for all the recent troubles. He takes absolutely no responsibility for management operating decisions that anger customers. For example, he takes no responsibility for the recent token fiasco. Our members took all the flak for that. He takes no responsibility for the staff cutbacks that result in dirty subway stations and washrooms. He takes no responsibility for the St. Clair cost overruns (which, by the way, were the result of contracting out). He takes NO responsibility for *any* management decisions that have adversely affected service and led to great customer dissatisfaction. No, it's all the workers' fault. Not Gary Webster's fault. He's only been Chief General Manager for four years. And before that he was General Manager of Operations for only ten years. How could any of this customer service dissatisfaction be his fault?

Nor does Webster bother to mention the chronic government underfunding that is responsible for fare increases and the sad state of our once world-leading transit system. Nor does he even once mention that TTC operators have often difficult and demanding jobs and go to work every day not knowing whether they are going to be insulted or assaulted. His email was a petulant, whiney rant that insulted all of his employees. It is certainly not worthy of a business leader who is raking in nearly \$300,000 a year.

Now let me conclude with an announcement of what the union is going to do to help restore some civility and rationality to this public debate on TTC service.

As a union, we acknowledge that there are things we can do as workers to improve the customer experience. We acknowledge that some of us are not always at our best. We acknowledge that some people may need customer service training or counselling, some more than others. We acknowledge that we are human beings and so are the customers we serve. We WANT a better relationship with our customers because, frankly, it is hell out there right now. We want public respect and we know we have to earn it every day.

At the same time, we want to separate out the service issues we *cannot* control from those we *can*. We want the public to understand that we do not choose the routes, we do not set the fares, we do not decide how many vehicles are available, we do not control the traffic or the weather. We want the public to have a better understanding of the challenges of our work. We want the public to know and feel that, insofar as it is humanly possible, we are doing the best we can, given the circumstances and the tools we are presented with.

So we are going to initiate a series of town hall meetings across this city at which rank and file transit workers can meet and talk with TTC customers about how we can work together to improve services and build a high level of mutual respect and support.

As a union, we will be prepared to listen to constructive criticism and take it to heart. We will be happy to listen to and discuss the public's suggestions for how we, as workers, can do better. We'll listen to customer complaints if they are presented in a reasonable way and we are given the courtesy of a courteous reply.

The objective of these meetings will not be to excuse behaviour that can be corrected. The objective will be to begin repairing the damage that has been done to our reputation and our relationships with our fellow citizens through an exchange of views and information.

I believe that one of the outcomes will be that we will find there is a great deal of common ground that unites TTC workers and riders. But we'll let the chips fall where they may.

These town halls are not going to happen right away. They will take some time to arrange and we will be working with interested community groups to ensure good turnouts and a true cross section of our customers in this very diverse city. We will also be approaching respected community leaders to serve as moderators.

I do not have the fine details right now of how they will be structured. I *can* tell you this: They will be well publicized and held at convenient times for public participation. And we *will* ensure that there will be plenty of coffee and adequate washrooms.