

# Refuse collectors: essential but invisible

Photo: © Sadak Souici



Praised in spring 2020 as “frontline” workers against Covid-19, Parisian refuse collectors are now speaking out against a shameful lack of recognition.

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## *Staff representatives sounded the alarm on the hazards of daily life, particularly the survival time of the virus on refuse.*

The thanks were short-lived. Very short-lived, according to the men and women who get up at four o'clock in the morning to empty our dustbins, dispose of our bin bags that have been ripped open by rats, cats or crows, or clear up the surgical masks that litter the pavement. During the early months of the health crisis, when many French people were teleworking, refuse collectors were among the workers that society relied upon and whose activity could not be stopped. In the street, in response to the intrigued expressions of passers-by, they finally appeared to be anonymous no longer. "At first, they greeted us, and some of them clapped for us. It was as if they were finally seeing us," recalls 43-year-old Romain, a refuse collector for the past 10 years in the 14th arrondissement in Paris. "But that's all over now," he concludes quickly as he notices the time.

The *ripeur*, to use the name given to these refuse collectors who stand on the back of the lorry and pick up bins full of household waste, finishes putting on his uniform. It is 6.05 a.m., and his round will begin in a few minutes in the mild morning air. It's time to get the day's route from Marc, the foreman who coordinates the roster. He will then give this to the driver of the truck, Cyrille, 47 years old, whom Romain knows well. They put their masks on in the changing room – the staff have been cut, in theory, to 11 people because of Covid-19.

The people who do this work are in constant fear of contamination, although they have gradually got used to it. The refuse collectors try to keep a distance between each other – as far as possible, but there are 37 of them and their offices are not very spacious. Despite the instructions on the wall (a sign forbidding staff to fist-bump each other, and a poster saying "Stay alert during your break"), at least seven staff have tested positive for the virus in a year, one of whom has been suffering from "long Covid" (persistent symptoms) since last winter. "That's Eric, poor bloke. He's 55 years old, his respiratory capacity wasn't good enough for him to come back to work," explains Romain, who is ready to set off.

### **The public-private divide**

In Paris, the Direction de la Propreté et des Eaux (Department for Sanitation and Water, DPE) has 5 000 employees, a fifth of whom have been infected by Covid-19. Contact cases are not recorded, much to the regret of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) trade union. "From the first lockdown, we've been calling for mandatory tests," says Cyrille before getting into his lorry, but the DPE has never provided them. This demand is often repeated by the refuse collectors, although they acknowledge that they have been provided with masks and sanitising gel since March 2020.

In the private sector, the protection of refuse collectors has been worse. While half of the waste management in Île-de-France is the responsibility of four undertakings

(Pizzorno, Urbaser, Veolia and Derichebourg), refuse collectors had to wait several weeks to be provided with equipment. "It was very difficult at first," says Ali Chaligui, a CGT delegate at Veolia. "Measures were only taken on a broader scale from the beginning of May. Prior to that, in order to get protected, some refuse collectors were even forced to exercise their right to withdraw from work in order to bring pressure to bear on management. That was when staff representatives sounded the alarm on the hazards of daily life, particularly the survival time of the virus on refuse." Because of a lack of accurate scientific data, this concern continues to worry many refuse collectors, whether in the private or public sectors, whose bodies have to come into contact with bins.

Apart from this difference in treatment, the private sector differs from the public sector because of its flexibility in relation to working time. More precisely, private-sector refuse collectors receive wages that are a little higher than those of their public-sector colleagues (around 1 450 euros net per month), and have rosters according to the tonnage of waste: if bins are empty, they can go home earlier. The reverse applies if they are full. On the other hand, they do not enjoy the job security of the public

↳ Provided by Paris City Council, the refuse collector's gear consists of trousers, a T-shirt, shoes, a yellow vest and gloves. Photo: © Sadak Souici





↕ The refuse collectors get changed in the locker room at 6 a.m.. The team has been reduced to 11 people due to Covid-19.  
↖ As well as emptying household bin bags, the refuse collectors change the bags of the street bins.  
Photos : © Sadak Souici

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↓ Romain waves to Cyrille to warn him about the traffic.  
Photo: © Sadak Souici

sector, where refuse collectors have very well-defined schedules ranging from six to nine hours' work per day. This is the case for Romain and Jimmy, the 42-year-old second bin man who accompanies him on this morning's round: starting at 6.10 a.m., the round continues until 7.30 a.m., starts again between 8.45 and 9 a.m., when the driver empties the lorry, and finishes at around 1.30 p.m.

"In the public sector, many refuse collectors believe that their working conditions are reasonable. The daily load has improved over the years; they don't run the risk of being sacked as easily as they do in the private sector; the pay, though not very high, is still above the minimum wage; and training isn't required. While this sector has improved, the labour market for insecure populations has been deteriorating. Refuse collectors therefore seem to have hit the jackpot," says Hugo Bret, a doctoral student in sociology who has completed a the-

sis on the working conditions of refuse collectors in Île-de-France. And recruitment is constant: on 7 May 2021, Paris City Council sought to recruit no fewer than 250 refuse collectors. Working according to these timetables, in addition to opportunities in the afternoon and evening up to 11.30 p.m., the only condition is to be under 45 years of age.

Cyrille is very familiar with this timetable. "I started at the City Council at the age of 19 and a half. When I got my BEP (technical school certificate) in electrotechnical technology, I started off as a cable fitter for Peugeot. It wasn't for me though; I love being outside, so I left and heard that the City Council was recruiting. At some point, I chose to be a refuse collector," he explains in the cab of his tipper truck, glancing at the two screens on his dashboard that allow him to check whether his bin men are actually on their "footrest", the platform they stand on when the lorry is moving. "There's



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no doubt about it, at the beginning, people give you a funny look. And then you become indifferent to it,” he notes, adding that the job is less looked down upon than it used to be. In 2007, however, Cyrille decided he wanted to progress professionally. He took an internal competitive exam (*concours interne*) and obtained his heavy goods and public vehicle licences. With his seniority and his driver’s status, higher up the hierarchy than a bin man, he’ll retire at around 2 800 euros a month. “I should retire at the age of 62. And to think it used to be 55,” he bemoans, in light of the arduous nature of the job.

### **Hazards of the job**

For drivers, bad posture on a daily basis is enough to cause serious pain to the lumbar vertebrae. “It’s the knees as well,” adds Cyrille. “Lorries used to have manual gearboxes. They were often Renault Punchers, which were not very ergonomic and didn’t have air conditioning or heating. But, in particular, they did have dual clutch transmission. That meant that your knee was working all the time in built-up areas, so, at the end of the working day, some drivers couldn’t even walk properly,” he recalls, relieved that that period had only lasted a few years.

The job is even harder for ordinary refuse collectors. Facing the vagaries of the weather on a daily basis, the bodies of these operatives are always under stress: they have to lift plastic bins – sometimes made even more cumbersome by glass bottles – up over their shoulder and twist their wrists as they manoeuvre the green wheelie bins into place for emptying, often two at a time. This has to be done while ensuring that they avoid speeding scooters, or cyclists concentrating on where they are going. After 10 years as a

bin man, Ali Chaligui can confirm: “I suffer from both ankle pain and back pain. When it gets humid again, my shoulder aches. That’s caused by the lorry jolting as it stops and starts.” Thirty years or so ago, the bins didn’t even have wheels: two bin men would carry bins weighing tens of kilos, while a third would guide them. “The older guys struggled on. Their shoulders went after a few years,” explains Romain, who pulls his green bin up before pressing a blue button to empty it.

Refuse collectors are increasingly keen to highlight this drudgery on social networks. An example is the @eboueursdeparis Twitter account, which has close to 10 000 followers, and the TikTok channel of Ludovic, a 45-year-old refuse collector who has a substantial following of 143 000 subscribers. Through these two channels, the sector seeks to raise awareness of the difficulties they face on a daily basis and some of the anti-social behaviour they encounter: full bags stacked beside small rubbish bins, cigarette butts, plastics of all kinds littering the pavements, and so on. “We’re often told that we’re paid to pick things up, so people don’t think twice about chucking their rubbish down in front of us,” complains Cyrille, looking at a drinks can on the ground that he can see in his rear-view mirror. Walking along the pavement, Jimmy confirms: “The neighbourhood’s fairly residential here. In the 1st arrondissement where I normally work, there’s much more rubbish on the ground.” In spring 2020, the gap between the way society perceives refuse collectors, submitting them to such daily humiliations, and the actual importance of their role, became particularly evident. “You really feel that you’re an essential cog in the wheels, particularly when you’re working in the thick of the crisis,” says Romain, a rubbish bag in his hand. He will soon be leaving his job to become a steward at a waste facility.

### **Fighting back against a lack of appreciation**

This demand for recognition helped refuse collectors to earn a bonus of 35 euros per working day, or 700 euros per month, as “personnel who have been subject to exceptional constraints while combating the Covid-19 epidemic to ensure public service continuity”. But this only lasted during the first lockdown. It was dependent, in particular, on the goodwill of the municipalities and of private undertakings. In Bordeaux, for example, the CGT and FO trade unions called for a strike to increase the bonus that the City Council had initially set at 500 euros. In that already precarious context, refuse collectors were shocked to see that the law on civil service transformation was indeed upheld. Put to the vote in August 2019 by the National Assembly and scheduled to be applied in January 2022, this law establishes the loss of eight days’ holiday per year and calls the system for reducing working time into question. The aim is to extend the working time of public officials, including refuse collectors, even though they actually suffer greater hardship. A refuse collector would nevertheless live, on average, 17 years less than the average French worker, according to figures regularly quoted by the media, although challenged elsewhere.

“They always come to check on us,” complains Cyrille, referring to DPE members, after finishing his first round at about 7.50 a.m., starting in “the countryside” (the areas outside Paris, such as Gentilly to the south). At the entrance to the depot, there are two buckets on a bench: the red one contains detergent for cleaning gloves, while the other, a blue one, contains soap for washing hands. A third bucket on the ground is used to clean footwear. Once the workers are in the break room, spirits are high. Very few mention the social movement that has been under way since 17 November 2020, when they took a series of drastic measures: the first protest on the roof of the DPE, the second on 25 May 2021 at the City Hall, and another in the City Council in the 13th arrondissement at the beginning of June.

The protest at the City Hall, which was by far the most symbolic, was brought about because of a pirated recording of a meeting attended by nine executives, including the heads of the DPE, the Service Technique de la Propreté de Paris (City of Paris Sanitation Department, STPP) and the Service Technique de l’Eau et de l’Assainissement (Water Treatment and Purification Department, STEA). Made without their knowledge and now available on

YouTube, elements of the strategy of the various departments can be heard, together with a certain unease about introducing the law on civil service transformation: “Even so, the risk is that it’ll sail through in the next two months... nobody’s understood a thing... [...] and then we’ll apply the thing, and afterwards we’ll find ourselves in a sticky situation,” the Director of the DPE is heard saying. “That recording didn’t surprise me,” says Cyrille. “We’re not appreciated, and that proves it.” The recording really galvanised refuse collectors and led to a 70% adherence to the strike on the day they went into the City Hall. When Philippe<sup>1</sup> comes into the break room, his colleagues ask him to tell them about what he’d experienced that day. “There must’ve been around 200 people. There was a tremendous atmosphere! Then, at one point, I was going

to go out to grab myself something to eat, and I saw that the cops had tightened the security in front of the entrance. They beat me all over with their truncheons,” he says, before putting his yellow vest back on: it’s time for the second round.

This police violence was disappointing for others too, since it is a form of repression against people who are defending a particular idea of public service. Every day, just as they do here on the roads of the university campus where Cyrille’s dustbin lorry ambles along, thousands of refuse collectors demonstrate that they are needed – but, as the driver complains, “[T]hey’re asking us to do more with less”. Doctoral student Hugo Bret explains: “A number of staff, particularly those who have a career path in which public employment provides them with greater social mobility, have a sense

of pride, a feeling of usefulness to society.” This sentiment must be acknowledged; we cannot allow refuse collectors to once again be rendered invisible.

At Porte d’Ivry, where Cyrille empties his lorry, the huge waste incineration centre is hidden just behind architect Jean Nouvel’s new, flamboyant twin towers – making it, rather symbolically, hardly noticeable. ●

**1.** His first name has been changed for the purposes of this article.

↓ Dozens of trucks unload the waste collected over the day.  
Photo: © Sadak Souici

