

Protest at Loblaws was undeserved

THREE YEARS ago, Toronto Action for Social Change burst on the scene like a band of modern-day Robin Hoods, harassing the rich to help the poor.

The group dug vegetable gardens at Queen's Park to force politicians to pay attention to hunger. It blocked traffic on Bay Street to draw attention to corporate greed. It held weekly vigils at the Legislature to protest welfare cuts.

But lately its antics have begun to pall.

It's not that Toronto is too straight-laced for guerrilla social activism. The problem is that these crusaders — unlike the legendary Robin Hood — don't seem to know where to aim their arrows.

They're hitting the wrong targets. They're hurting the very people they want to protect.

Last weekend, 25 members of the group showed up at a downtown Loblaws store to disrupt the spring food drive. They handed out leaflets accusing the grocery chain of hypocrisy, claiming it raked in huge profits while professing to care about hunger.

One of the protesters, Matthew Behrens, showed up in an Easter Bunny outfit and dared Loblaws to have him arrested in front of wide-eyed children.

He got his wish. Store officials called the police who charged him with trespassing.

Fifteen blocks away at the Daily Bread Food Bank, executive director Sue Cox fought to control her anger and anxiety. This was the last thing the charity needed, in the middle of a disappointing food drive.

Loblaws is the food bank's most generous corporate donor. It provides the 100,000-square-foot warehouse that Daily Bread uses, rent-free. It pays the heat and hydro. It supplies the donation bags distributed by The Toronto Star during food drives. It puts collection bins in firehalls and postal stations. And it provides food to social service agencies throughout the city.

"Why would you target people when they're doing something good?" Cox asked. "This is just beyond me."

She has implored Behrens and his friends, who staged similar demonstrations at Loblaws stores at Christmas and Thanksgiving, to stop. She has explained that their protests are driving away potential donors; smearing the reputation of one of the few corporations that is doing something about hunger; and destroying the incentive for other businesses to give.

He rejects this reasoning. "Loblaws gets good PR for being part of the food drive, but it contributes to the problem. It helped elect the Harris government.

"It does not pay its fair share of taxes.

Galen Weston (chairman of George Weston Ltd, which owns Loblaws) is one of the wealthiest men in Canada.

"We don't want to hurt the food drive," Behrens insisted. "We just want Loblaws to be an accountable member of the community."

To meet this test, the grocery chain would have to stop contributing to the provincial Conservatives; stop paying its top executives huge salaries, stop deferring its taxes; and acknowledge that rapacious corporations are driving people into poverty.

In short, it would have renounce capitalism.

That isn't going to happen in this life. While Behrens and his friends have every right to fight for a fairer distribution of wealth, a more humane social system and a repudiation of the profit motive, there are consequences to consider.

Approximately 135,000 people in this city use food banks. They depend on public generosity and corporate goodwill, both of which are in short supply.

By denigrating Loblaws' efforts to contribute to hunger relief — while ignoring the thousands of companies that do nothing — Behrens and his friends send a simple message to corporate Canada: The way to avoid bad publicity is not to give, not to get involved, not to care.

By turning food drives into an embarrassment for Loblaws and a test of nerves for Daily Bread, they jeopardize a relationship that that both sides have worked hard to build.

The sad thing is that Cox and Behrens aren't really adversaries.

They're both frustrated that food banks, set up in the early '80s as an emergency response to hunger, have become part a permanent fixture in Canadian society.

They both want governments, not charities, to take responsibility for those left behind by the marketplace.

They both think it is wrong that people have to depend on hand-outs to eat.

All that separates them is tactics.

The workers at Daily Bread Food Bank think filling empty stomachs matters more than preaching ideology.

The folks at Toronto Action for Social Change think exposing the causes of poverty matters more than alleviating the symptoms.

There is room for both views.

All Behrens and his merry band have to do, out of respect for the poor, is picket somewhere other than Loblaws during food drives. It's not a lot to ask.

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