

Crack down on overlong illegal shifts, operator urges

Montreal system spurs contractors to 'push, push, push'

JAN RAVENSBERGEN
THE GAZETTE

Is freshly appointed Montreal snow-clearing czar Luis Miranda truly serious about public safety?

If so, he can start by eliminating overlong illegal shifts of "18 hours, 24 hours straight, except for meal stops" worked with impunity by some independent snow-clearing truckers, Miguel Biurrarena said yesterday.

That single step would sharply reduce the risks that Montreal pedestrians run during after-storm snow-clearing marathons, he said. He's an independent owner-operator who runs a trailer-equipped rig that hauls at least 30 tonnes of snow at a time.

Such a move would also fall easily within the power of Montreal authorities to impose, Biurrarena added.

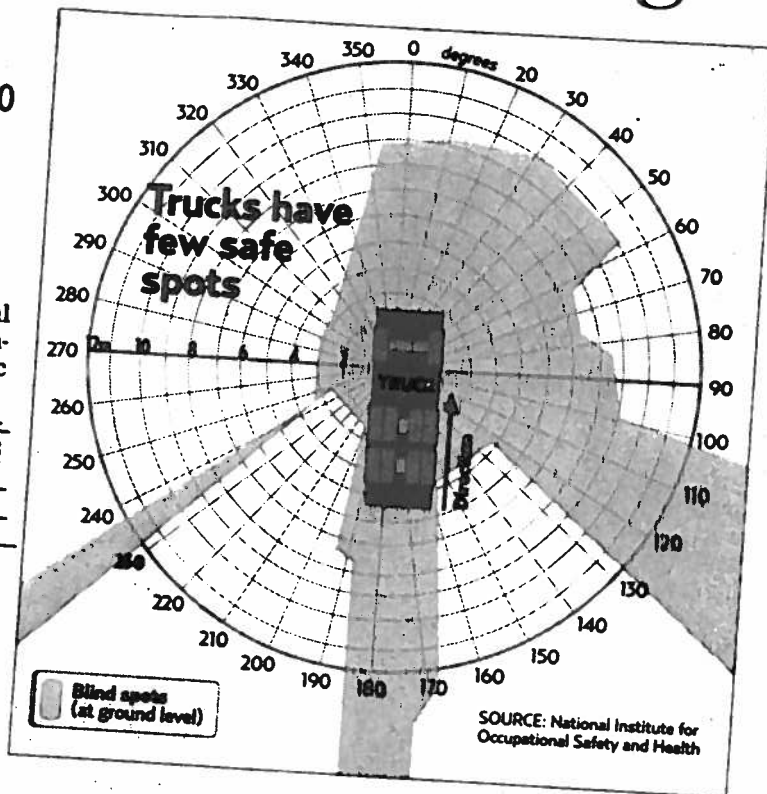
The city should simply insist that any snow-clearing contracts for which contractors promise 24-hour-a-day availability of a truck also provide the name of the second-shift driver to be used on that vehicle, he said, given that the legal limit for a driver's shift length is 13 hours.

"Some of them follow the law, some of them don't," Biurrarena said of the independents.

He uses his rig to transport snow for Laval - but said he flatly refuses to bid for any snow-clearing work in Montreal against other independents because "some of them are cow-boys" and the bidding for such work is cut-throat, with prices below the threshold where common-sense safety standards can be respected.

Montreal relies on a pay-by-volume system.

This encourages private contractors to "push, push, push," Biurrarena said - and thus to brush aside rules on shift lengths and speed limits while



THE GAZETTE

He refused to tie overlong shifts or other Montreal practices - including a system of fines when contractors fall short of their snow-removal quotas - to Tuesday's three snow-clearing deaths: "Let them investigate, I don't know what happened there."

Following the latest pedestrian fatalities, new municipal snow guru Miranda promised to dissect how the city does snow-clearing: "The way I see it now, we have to look at everything from A to Z and start all over if necessary."

For instance, Miranda said, he's considering a cut in the number of kilometres contractors are obliged to cover within a set time frame.

Miranda wasn't available for an interview yesterday afternoon, a city official said when asked for a response to Biurrarena's shift-limit proposal.

Police can be expected to crack down on speeding snow-removal trucks across Montreal Island during the next cleanup, but this week's deaths are "likely to be forgotten in three weeks," said Richard Forest, general manager of Transpura

tors are affiliated.

An opportunity triggered by these deaths to markedly upgrade the system's safety would thus fall through the cracks, he predicted.

Montreal-style pedestrian snow-clearing deaths "don't happen in the Abitibi," Forest said.

Municipal authorities there "pay by the hour," he added - instead of Montreal's approach of accepting the lowest bid per cubic metre of snow moved.

Among the independents bidding for Montreal work, many come in from rural areas geared up for intense bouts of work and have nothing else to do in town, Biurrarena said.

"There's always somebody who is ready to cut their prices," said Clément Bélanger, president of l'Association nationale des camionneurs artisans Inc., speaking for about 5,000 independent truckers across Quebec.

Inevitably, Bélanger said, such ferocious price-cutting "means that safety is compromised."

"The price is not high enough that they can do everything safe..."

Health and Safety Questions on Article: “Crack down on overlong illegal shifts...”

1. What is the main problem in this article?
 - a) Trucks that are too big
 - b) Too much work
 - c) Shifts that are too long and threaten people’s safety.

2. What does impunity mean?

3. Why is it risky for workers to work 24 hour shifts?

4. What is one way to ensure that a second driver is present during snow clearing periods?

5. How do “independents” create problems for city workers?

6. Are “independents” covered by unions?
