

Strike victims strap on walking boots

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It's 3:30 a.m. and Gilles Labelle -- transit strike victim -- pokes off the alarm on his clock radio, gets out of bed, heads to the bathroom, brushes his teeth, shaves, washes up, clicks on the TV and takes in the weather channel with his wife Pamela.

He forgoes breakfast, puts on his Commissionaire uniform, puts on his black leather shoes (the winter boots Pamela bought him pinch his toes), puts on his navy blue trenchcoat (layered, windproof), puts on his black scarf, puts on his two pairs of cotton gloves (the red ones inside the blue ones), puts on his navy blue hat with the fur flaps, puts on his iPod, and, now 4 a.m., leaves his apartment at the far eastern end of Rideau St. for his two-hour trudge in the pitch black, freezing cold, sometimes a blizzard, sometimes freezing rain, sometimes howling wind, for his security job at a federal government building in Westboro that begins at 6 a.m.

Long journey ahead

Gilles Labelle walks from where he lives on Beausoleil Dr. to Friel St., Friel to Rideau St., along Rideau to Elgin St., across Elgin to Albert St., along Albert to Scott St., along Scott to the Westboro Transit Station near Churchill Ave., along a path to the Graham Spry Federal Building on Lanark Ave.

Gilles Labelle, 25, has no car by choice, Pamela Labelle, an Algonquin student, has no car by choice, Gilles Labelle has been making his long, daunting, journey into darkness by foot every day since the strike began because there is no one at that ungodly hour to drive him, and then, when his shift ends at 1:30 p.m., shleps all the way back home because there is no one off work at that hour to drive him.

"Obviously I'm hoping the strikers will vote to end it. I think the city's offer is a good one. I'm not angry at the bus drivers, but I am frustrated."

"I just want it to end."

He recently thought one of his hands was frostbitten. He thinks that might have been the God-forsaken pre-dawn of the ripping, slamming blizzard when the temperature was -30C.

"I just love my job, I love being at work. I've always been a very dedicated Commissionaire. I figured it out -- I've walked 167.9 km since the first day of the strike."

He's 5-foot-7, 138 pounds. He denies that before the strike he was 158.

Hitchhiking an option? "No. I've always been taught never to hitchhike."

"Walking to work, I never see more than three or four cars anyway. No people."

"Snowplows all over the place, though. The worst part is when the sidewalks and roads haven't been plowed. It makes for some heavy going."

He smiles. "People in the building where I work tell me flat out they wouldn't do what I'm doing. They think I'm crazy. I'm able to walk, so that's what I do. I walk."

Hoping for resolution

His working day over, Gilles Labelle, who says he's not crazy, who hopes the strike ends on today's vote, who walks because he's able to, starts walking in the cold and falling snow: Along Scott St., crossing Tweedsmuir Ave., crossing McRae Ave., crossing Clifton Rd., crossing West Village Pvt., crossing Island Park Dr., crossing Oakdale Ave., crossing Rockhurst Rd., crossing Carleton Ave., crossing Western Ave., crossing Gilchrist Ave., crossing Ross Ave., crossing Grange Ave., crossing Caroline Ave., crossing Huron Ave., crossing Holland Ave., walking, walking.

Along Scott, crossing Parkdale Ave., crossing Pinehurst Ave., crossing Hinchey St., crossing Stirling Ave., crossing Pinhey Ave., crossing Merton St., crossing Manchester St., crossing Garland St., crossing Hilda St., crossing Bayview Rd., crossing City Centre Ave., crossing Preston St., crossing Booth St., crossing Lorne Ave., crossing Perkins St., crossing Empress Ave., walking, walking. Along Albert St., crossing Bronson Ave., crossing Bay St., crossing Lyon St., crossing Kent St., crossing Bank St., crossing O'Connor St., crossing Metcalfe St., walking, walking, along Elgin St. to Rideau St., along Rideau, crossing Sussex Dr., crossing Nicholas St., crossing Waller St., crossing Cumberland St., crossing King Edward Ave., crossing Nelson St. to Friel St., along Friel to Beausoleil, into his apartment, the time now almost 4 p.m.

He undresses, showers, has a two-hour nap, has supper with Pamela, watches TV with her until 9 p.m. goes to bed, sets the alarm for 3:30 a.m.

"Since the strike began," says Gilles Labelle, "I've had no social life."

"None. That's okay. I love my job, I want to be at work."