

Trash haulers and truck drivers strike in Maryland

Our reporters

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Truck drivers and trash haulers have been on strike since last Friday at Unity Disposal in Laurel, Maryland.

Seven months ago, the nearly 150 workers at the Laurel hub voted to organize under the Laborers' International Union of North America (LiUNA). In return, management at the company has sought to drag out contract negotiations, demanding that trash haulers take a pay cut while drivers receive a minor wage increase as part and parcel to the negotiations being accepted.

The workers are striking for increased pay and benefits. Unity Disposal, which has a nearly \$2 million yearly contract with Montgomery County alone, is demanding a pay cut of \$4 a day from trash haulers, while offering a \$2 a day raise for drivers.

The disposal company services over 100,000 residents in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC and further north. The Washington, DC metropolitan region is one of the most unequal areas in the United States, with a recent report by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) stating a family of four—two adults and two children—requires a yearly income of between \$81,900 and \$89,600 to live comfortably in the region. In comparison, the average hauler at Unity makes roughly \$10.50 an hour (\$21,000 a year), barely one-quarter the required amount to meet the required minimum living standard.

Currently, workers either have health insurance from Unity, with expensive premiums that workers struggle to pay if they do utilize insurance, or some form of Obamacare. Many workers pay \$200 a week on healthcare, meaning two days of their five-day work week goes straight to insurance.

Replacement workers have been brought in to continue trash pickup. Striking workers say that the replacement workers are untrained, and represent a

danger to themselves, their fellow workers, and the community. They cite numerous safety violations, such as leaving broken glass in the street, driving backwards with trash haulers on the truck and leaving trash cans out in the street, among other things.

Despite the widespread anger of workers at Unity toward their unjust working conditions, no sympathy strikes to support the worker's struggle have been called by LiUNA, nor has the union appealed to the broader population in order to galvanize workers regionally. When asked by a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter why similar actions were not being promoted across the region, a representative of LiUNA cited various “no strike” clauses that had been accepted by the union at various workplaces.

LiUNA has no public plans for any sympathy strike, and has not made any appeal for support to unorganized workers at Ecology Services Refuse and Recycling (ESRR), which services two-thirds of Montgomery County and is the largest disposal company in the state.

Instead, the union has engaged in a low-level public relations campaign, leafleting in the communities the workers serve to announce the presence of scabs, but with no further appeal to the living conditions faced by the majority of the working class in the area.

Similarly, few workers from the plant itself have been called to the picket lines, with less than 50 haulers and drivers being reported outside picketing on Friday, the first day of the strike.

Francisco Mendez, a trash hauler, spoke to the WSWs. Speaking of the working conditions, he said, “We aren't paid much. In Howard County we only make \$84 a day, and even in Montgomery County, where we get paid \$100 a day, it's a struggle.”

“We all have families. We can't afford insurance. We want everyone to know what we are fighting for:

better pay, better benefits, and respect,” he continued. When asked why there aren’t other disposal plants on strike supporting the strike at Unity Disposal, Francisco said, “I don’t think that the other plants even know we are striking.”

The current strike is the first seen at the plant. In order for the courageous stand taken by workers at the Laurel hub not to be isolated and sold out, it will require an active appeal for support to the working class throughout the Washington-Baltimore metropolitan region. The strike by trash haulers and drivers follows the nearly week-long strike of aides at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore last spring.



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