

Maryland sanitation workers' strike enters fifth day

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A strike by Maryland sanitation workers entered its fifth day on Wednesday, as truck operators and helpers in suburban Washington, DC declared their intention to remain on strike until trash removal company Unity Disposal and Recycling agree to demands for better wages and benefits. The strike has been going on since Friday.

Nearly seven months ago, workers at the plant, which serves nearly 60,000 residents in suburban Washington and central Maryland, voted to join the Laborers International Union of North America (LIUNA). Workers at the plant make a daily rate of \$84 for a helper and \$120 for drivers, roughly a quarter the amount a worker needs in order to live comfortably in the Washington, DC region.

Rather than accede to the workers demands, the company, which has a more than \$21 million operating contract in the central Maryland region of Montgomery County alone, has sought to drag out negotiations, attempting to divide workers by offering a minor rate increase for drivers while imposing a pay cut on helpers.

On Tuesday, a number of striking workers spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters on the conditions they face. "We have very difficult working conditions. We have to work when there's rain and snow, and can't leave until the routes are finished," stated Martin, a driver. "The helpers have to lift 15-20 tons of trash or recycling every day, although there's much more this time of year. We're overworked and underpaid. We don't get a fair shake," he commented.

Numerous workers noted that they were paid by the day, rather than hourly, meaning that their roughly \$10.50 "hourly" rates usually translated into much less when the length of their days were taken into account. They added that no one received any overtime pay.

A driver named Francisco described Unity's methods of minimizing its visible costs by splitting various operations into thinly veiled "shell companies," so as to maximize profitability. "They've got trucks from other companies doing routes. Unity, Bates, Elegance and Goode are all owned by the same people, and they are shifting trucks around. That's illegal, but they are doing it. These replacement workers are untrained. They start routes in the middle of the route, and leave trash bins everywhere," he said.

The callous attitude of management toward its employees was demonstrated by the company's hiring of dozens of scabs in order to break the strike. Hired without proper training, these replacement workers have been documented working without safety gear, as well as creating hazardous messes in neighborhoods from the garbage they collect.

A number of workers commented on the large numbers of police that have been mobilized against the strikers. "This is just a tactic the bosses are using to make us intimidated," said Joseph, a driver. Joseph noted that in the past several months his wage had been reduced by \$5 daily at the company, even while he had gained seniority. "We're out here fighting for better health insurance, higher wages, and pensions. We don't mind the work, we just want respect," he stated.

Damion, a younger worker, spoke of the recent police killings in New York and Missouri. "They have been killing people for decades," he stated. Recounting an incident where he had a significant sum of money stolen from him by police at a traffic stop, Damion remarked "They kill us, and steal from us. They are a gang."

The strike at Unity Disposal is the second in little over a year, as workers at the Laurel plant and the nearby Potomac Disposal Services plant walked out in

late 2013 to protest the unjust firing of an employee at the latter location. That strike ended with Potomac agreeing to allow its workers to unionize.

The assault on the basic right to a livable income comes amid the move by big business to privatize large swaths of the public sector. In the city of Detroit, which recently emerged from a union-backed bankruptcy process, trash removal services have been completely privatized at the same time as workers have received greatly reduced benefits and wages.

LiUNA, which boasts on its webpage of understanding “the pressures that companies are under to be competitive in today’s global economy” as well as touting its numerous “business-labor partnerships” has worked to isolate the strike. It has not sought to organize any sympathy strikes among its membership throughout the region, many of who work under “no strike” clauses negotiated by the union.

Far from fighting to improve wages and working conditions the union operates as a labor contractor, promising companies a corporate-friendly climate to do business in.

The conscious and coordinated effort of the laborers union and management to isolate the workers led Unity spokesman Max Gamara to remark to local media earlier in the week that the company “continues to operate successfully and has incurred no disruptions despite today’s strike” and that the action was “more about a show than about achieving an agreement.”



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