

Maryland workers speak out in support of striking sanitation employees

Our reporters
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Workers at Unity Disposal and Recycling in Montgomery County, Maryland near Washington, D.C. have been on strike since late December, after the utility contractor refused to grant truck drivers and helpers improved wages and living conditions. Many of the workers currently work for poverty-level pay, with no chance of any overtime payment while the company, which owns numerous contracting firms in the region, is one of the sanitation industry's wealthiest.

On Friday, reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers in the Montgomery County region about the strike and the conditions of their own jobs. Reporters spoke to workers at Potomac Disposal in nearby Gaithersburg, which employs both county and private sector workers. In late 2013 both Unity and Potomac workers went on strike together over job conditions. Workers at both companies are represented by the Laborers International Union of North America (LiUNA).

Potomac workers professed strong support for the courageous stand taken at Unity Disposal, while confessing that they had been told very little about the strike itself. Elton, a helper, expressed support for the Unity employees and the prospect of a mass strike against impoverished conditions. "I think it needs to happen... We live paycheck to paycheck, and most of us can't even survive off of that. We are kept divided. The bosses break apart plants or fire workers who complain," he said, adding that there was a conscious effort being made to keep the workers of the different companies from speaking to each other.

"I work on the private side of the plant, so we have to use these old trucks," he continued, pointing to a row of vehicles behind him. "The maintenance on the trucks is horrible; they break down all of the time. The county workers [who are unionized] get the better trucks, but

they aren't much better," he explained.

Tim, a helper on the private side, spoke at length about his working conditions. "I've only been working for a week, but I only get paid \$65 a day. I worked here 7 years ago, and I got paid \$100 a day. We have long routes, and the company will add houses to our route without a pay increase. Some days we show up here at 5:30 am and are sent home because 'there is no work,'" he said. "It's not like the routes change every day, and the routes are only getting longer. Some guys here only work 2 or 3 days a week, even though they show up every day. You don't get paid if you get sent home," he explained.

Antonio, a day laborer who had worked at Potomac, hinted at the untapped potential for a struggle by workers in the area, saying that last year's joint strike action conducted by workers at both companies had brought Potomac's corporate management to its knees. "The owner [of Potomac] said that he was going to have to sell the company if the strike continued. I think that was only because both Unity and Potomac went on strike," he said.

The strike at Unity Disposal and Recycling, which is only being carried out by a portion of its workers, has been largely isolated by the workers' union. LiUNA, which peppers its mid-Atlantic web page with crass appeals to the regional business community while boasting of its many "business-labor partnerships" and its understanding of the need for companies "to be competitive in today's global economy," has played a key role in dividing the workers and isolating those who are on strike, showing far more interest in cutting a deal with management than with issuing an appeal for support from its own membership in the area.

A driver at Potomac, who is represented by the union, told the WSWS, "[w]e haven't been told anything

about the strike at Unity. We know that there's a strike going on, but no one explains what is happening." When asked by reporters if there had been any improvement in his working conditions since receiving union representation, he answered "there has been talk of getting holiday pay, but they [the union] have been waffling. They're using a lot of 50/50 [chance] talk. I think they are trying to sweep it under the rug."

Similarly, a group of helpers said that they had not heard much about the strike at Unity, adding that the most significant change to their working conditions had been the \$14 dues fee each now had to pay monthly to the union.

A group of construction workers discussed the harsh conditions they shared with other workers regionally as well as the broader social situation. "When I worked for Clarks Construction, they would start laying off workers halfway through construction. Bit by bit they would let people go until the job was done," said Jose. He continued, saying, "sometimes they would lay everyone off and hire cheaper workers if they thought they could do it. There and here the bosses insult us."

On the question of the trade unions, Jose noted that, "the unions will only strike if it gets them recognized by the company, nothing more. They don't fight for our needs; the unions work with the companies to lay off workers when there is no work. They are supposed to keep us working, but instead just tell us to wait at home until something new comes. They say 'We'll call you when we've got a job for you.'"

Jose and his fellow workers were very supportive of the call for a general strike, while at the same time strongly supporting the Socialist Equality Party's call for international solidarity among workers. "We shouldn't have national borders. They just divide us. The borders and deportations are there to control us," he said.



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