

Union shuts down strike, pushes sellout of Maryland sanitation workers

Todd Mason, Nick Barrickman
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Maryland sanitation workers returned to the job last Thursday after their union agreed to a federal mediator's request to end the two-week strike. The nearly 100 workers wanted better pay and benefits from government contractor Unity Disposal and Recycling, which serves the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC. The union shut down the strike without securing any of the workers' basic demands and after confronting opposition from workers to the sweetheart deal it was prepared to sign.

Mediated talks, which cannot produce any substantive improvements from the original offer, are set to resume today. Showing their contempt for the workers, the Laborers International Union of North America (LIUNA) did not even bother to issue a public statement before ordering the strikers back to work.

Throughout the walkout, LIUNA, which boasts of having over 500,000 members nationally, isolated the Unity workers and kept fellow sanitation workers in nearby facilities, who face the same conditions, in the dark about the struggle. This is despite the fact that sanitation workers at Potomac Disposal had struck together with Unity workers in October 2013 to gain union recognition. LIUNA signed a pro-company deal with Potomac, while Unity workers are still seeking their first contract after voting to join LIUNA in April 2014.

Unity's last proposal includes a meager five percent wage increase to helpers and three percent to drivers. For helpers, this means a raise of less than \$5 a day. In exchange for the raise, the company is demanding that workers drop their lawsuit against Unity Disposal stemming from its poverty wages and other practices. Officials in Howard County, which Unity services, also want workers to accept a downward-moving pay scale for each additional route they work. This is, in effect, a

pay cut, allowing Unity to pay lower hourly rates the longer workers work.

In addition, the company wants to strip workers of paid vacation time.

In interviews with the *World Socialist Web Site*, workers at Potomac Disposal stated that union leaders did not explain why they called Unity workers out on strike, much less how Potomac workers could support their struggle. Instead LIUNA conducted a toothless publicity campaign urging residents to not tip strikebreakers doing the work of the Unity workers.

The isolation of the strike at Unity Disposal began much earlier than its December 26 start. LIUNA has allowed the inclusion of no-strike clauses in nearly every contract it has negotiated in the region. This will be the likely result of the mediated negotiations too.

The proposed contract would give helpers \$23,000 and drivers \$32,000 a year to live on. These are poverty wages that no individual, much less a family, can reasonably expect to survive on in the DC metro area—one of the most expensive areas in the country. According to a recent report, a family of four in the region requires an annual income of at least \$81,900 to live comfortably.

A worker who wished to remain anonymous told WSWs reporters that every contract proposal has come from Unity and that the LIUNA bureaucrats have been urging the workers to take the deal. LIUNA officials have not put forth any counter-proposals and are actively encouraging workers to accept the company's terms, which have remain unchanged.

The ending of the Unity Disposal strike action comes less than a year after Johns Hopkins Hospital workers in Baltimore, Maryland were ordered by the state government to go back on the job after they had voted twice to walk out. In that struggle, Service Employees

International Union (SEIU) immediately caved to the demands of then-Democratic Governor Martin O'Malley.

The struggle of sanitation workers in suburban Washington, DC cannot succeed without breaking the isolation imposed by LIUNA. This struggle must be taken out of the hands of the union apparatus through the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees to unify all sanitation workers in the region to fight for the right to a secure and decent paying job. Such a struggle can only be waged on an independent political basis, free from the Democratic and Republican parties and the trade union bureaucracy.



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