

Medical technicians and paramedics picket against low-wage exploitation

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Working EMTs and paramedics have been picketing at San Diego City Hall since last Thursday in protest to the extension of this contract due to the appallingly low wages offered by Rural/Metro. Currently, a new EMT starts at about \$10 per hour, and paramedics start at just over \$13 per hour.

WSWS reporters spoke to workers at a picket on Monday where they opposed the new contract and denounced Rural/Metro for their deplorable wages. Workers pointed out that a majority of Rural/Metro's employees qualify for Section 8 housing, WIC, food stamps, and other government assistance programs. Eighty percent of the workers earn less than \$30,000 per year.

Philomena, who has worked for Rural/Metro for 15 years, said, "What we get paid is a joke. The company is making money off the backs of its employees and not giving back. We've been without a raise since 2013." She said her children qualify for reduced price lunches at school and that she and her husband have had to rely on church donations to pay for childcare. Philomena said, "Your loved ones deserve an EMT or paramedic that is rested, not exhausted," adding that many Rural/Metro employees require second and third jobs to make ends meet for themselves and their families.

Philomena, who was originally hired as an EMT at \$8 per hour, now works as a paramedic earning just over \$13 per hour. She stated that the union initially asked for \$3 an hour increase (across the board), but it was brought down to a 4-5% raise, (or between 40 and 70 cents an hour), which the workers voted down with an overwhelming majority.

"That's not good enough. I'm unhappy with it and I wish that we could fight for more," Philomena told us. When we asked her about the "Fight for 15 Campaign", and whether she thought \$15 per hour was a living

wage, she replied, "No, not really, not in this city. Now that is substandard, there's no way you can make it on those kinds of wages, especially with four kids."

Workers discussed the difficult working conditions as an EMT or paramedic, responding to traffic accidents, medical emergencies, and potentially dangerous situations with violent patients. Bill, a paramedic and chief steward of NAGE EMS Local 619, said "within five years of working there is a 100 percent chance that you will be injured", noting that one female worker just worked 60 hours straight to make ends meet.

"People are going to get hurt," he said. "I've gotten a herniated disc on the job, and still had to keep going. Just yesterday, I had to deal with a kidney stone and eventually it just became too much to bear and I had to go into the emergency room. I've had knives pulled on me, I've had guns pulled on me. People have died in my arms."



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