

St. Petersburg, Florida: Wastewater workers under sustained attack by city officials in storm's wake

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20 June 2016

For the second time in less than a year, the mismanagement of St. Petersburg city officials has been exposed by a major tropical storm, which resulted this time in them dumping 10 million gallons of sewage into Tampa Bay. Tropical Storm Colin hit the Southeast US earlier this month.

As wastewater workers reported to the WSWS last year, these events are not anomalies. The pumping of sewage into bays and bayous is due to the decision to shutter their downtown treatment plant, as well as the presence of outdated equipment and machinery at the remaining plants that are badly in need of upgrades.

Rather than taking responsibility for their mistakes, officials instead have instituted merit-based raises for employees who keep their mouths closed about the conditions and the mismanagement. They have also begun stalking the Facebook profiles of employees to police their posts and photographs about their work.

Workers have also told the WSWS that the frequency of disciplinary measures for minor issues has increased dramatically, with the intent of firing “problem” employees or making them want to resign from their jobs if they exercise their democratic rights.

On top of all of this, the city has kept too few wastewater workers on staff, so that when a major storm comes through, workers have to work insanely long hours under gruelingly physical and mentally stressful conditions. Workers spoke to the WSWS about all of these issues.

Regarding the shuttered plant, a worker provided a photo of lift station 85, which “pumps all the flow that would have gone to the closed treatment plant and sends it to the southwest treatment plant. That black pipe on the ground was added last year and allows them

to divert water through the closed plant and into Tampa Bay.”

When asked whether this meant that city officials had been planning on dumping sewage into the bay from the beginning, he replied, “They were so sure that they would need to dump into the bay again, they left it from last year.” This point is important because last year city officials claimed that the storm that caused them to dump sewage into a bayou and the bay was a “100-year” historic storm and that the overflowing was inevitable.

“If the Albert Whitted plant was still online, in my professional opinion, we would not have had to pump into Clam Bayou last year or spill [wastewater] into the bay or the bayou this year,” the worker said. Another worker stated, “Every worker agrees that the plant needs to be reopened or the southwest plant needs to be expanded. If you are putting gas in your car, only so much is going to go in. We are at capacity most of the time anyway. During a major rain event, there is nowhere else for the flow to go.”

Workers also pointed out that it isn’t just storm surge that becomes a problem during major rain events. “Everything breaks under the load when there is a surge,” one worker explained. “There may be four inches of sand in the bottom of the pipe or wood may have settled in, and the surge pushes everything through. Because of this everything is breaking, over and over, and we have to repair the equipment at like 3:00 a.m. after not having slept since 4:00 a.m. the previous day.

The worker added, “I will be up there balancing on a pipe and breaking bolts so that we can put a new coupling on because it has to keep going. If that

machinery stops, all flow stops; we have to keep it working under any and all circumstances. Otherwise we might as well throw in the towel and say everybody has to leave St. Petersburg. It's not just 'too much water.' The system is overwhelmed, and all the machinery is working harder than it was designed to."

Workers explained how gruesome the conditions are for them during these events. "Because they shortened staff, those of us who are left are working 17- to 19-hour shifts," one said, adding, "It is nonstop—you go home, you eat, you go back, nonstop. During the storm last week, I was running from one broken thing to the next. I didn't pee for three days; I was blind, lost the ability to think, and was running on auto pilot trying to keep it going. People around you are running on anger and are stressed out completely."

"We are all run psychotically ragged," one worker related. "The last day we pumped into the bay. I was so knotted up I couldn't feel my hands because of carpal tunnel. I had knots in my back and had to get cortisone shots just to loosen up my muscles. I was barely ambulatory, but I had to go back to work because you can't call in sick. This is public safety. Every worker here is like that—all of them have surgeons on call because we all tear ourselves apart."

The physical and mental sacrifices made by workers show the despicable character of city officials in attacking the workers, threatening their jobs if they speak out about the mismanagement that has caused these conditions in the first place.

"We were told that we should go through our social media pages and delete any negative posts or images because the mayor's office was spending the day combing through whatever Facebook profiles they could find," one worker said. "We are all destroyed, but the upper echelons are angry that people are telling on them and want to fire people for saying that it is in any way their fault."

One man who works as a supervisor reported that he has had an overwhelming number of disciplinary documentations to make since the storm and that most of them are for very minor incidents. "They are essentially trying to create a paper trail so that they can fire these guys who are speaking out against them," he said. "Either that or the guys are so harassed that they resign on their own. Because of this, employees are essentially being told what they are allowed to say,

even in their own personal time, but this should be a matter of public record. Workers should be able to speak without being edited by their bosses."

Another way city officials are seeking to control free speech among their workers is through a merit-based raise system. "After last year's event," one worker said, "They were furious that there was public discussion about sewage. That was when they insisted that it was important to only have merit raises. In other words, if you keep your mouth shut and do what you're told, you might get a raise. If you don't, you get nothing. If you kiss ass and rat out coworkers you will get a raise."

One worker said, "They keep us intentionally understaffed in order to save money. They want a minimal crew of two guys per plant working 40-hour weeks, but then they run us into the ground during emergencies. At this point, if there was another rain event next week, everyone is going to say, 'Sorry we can't do this,' and everything will break, and St. Pete will be in sewage. I don't have to work. I am not property; they can't force me to work until I die. They want to be able to do that. They want to work you until there's nothing left of you."



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