

Pittsburgh sanitation workers strike to demand safe working conditions

A WSWS reporter

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Several hundred sanitation workers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania walked off the job Wednesday morning to demand protective gear after the wife of one of the workers tested positive for COVID-19. They are part of a growing wave of workers who are going on strike in opposition to demands that they work under unsafe conditions.

“We are risking our lives, we could be contaminated as well,” Sheldon White, a City of Pittsburgh Environmental Services employee, told KDKA news. Workers denounced management for concealing information about the possible spread of the virus among their co-workers.

While Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf ordered a shutdown for all of Allegheny County beginning this week to help prevent the spread of the deadly disease, sanitation was deemed an essential service to remain open.

“We want better equipment, better protective gear, we have no masks,” White told KDKA. “We want hazard pay.”

The job action was live streamed by sanitation worker Fitzroy Moss and posted on Facebook. The video included an angry confrontation between workers and local Teamsters officials who were trying to get them back to work.

City officials were quick to downplay the workers’ concerns. Pittsburgh Mayor William Peduto cited healthcare privacy laws as the reason workers were not informed and, rather than giving workers new gloves, they instructed them to clean their gloves each day.

“As far as equipment, we have changed the policies, we have been cleaning down the trucks, we have been working with our workers to allow them to clean their gloves on site,” the mayor told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

Peduto rejected workers’ requests for masks, claiming they would be more dangerous for the workers.

“It’s not right,” one sanitation worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “The city can spend all kinds of money on tracking us. They are even putting in ‘smart’ garbage cans. Why can’t they protect us?”

Local news media and city officials are making light of the workers’ concerns. Teamsters officials claimed the action was not a strike but the result of a misunderstanding.

“The reason the workers freaked out and may have thought they were locked out is because they had just recently heard rumors about a co-worker who had to quarantine due to the coronavirus,” Kevin Schmitt, president of the Teamsters Local 249 told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. “So, they show up to work, and they don’t know what’s going on when the doors are locked.”

The union worked out a deal with city officials that workers would be sent home for the rest of Wednesday and then make up their shift on Thursday.

The coronavirus is much more widespread in Pittsburgh and the surrounding area than officials have led people to believe. Official figures as of Thursday afternoon show 560 cases in Pennsylvania and 133 in Allegheny County. Despite this, there has been no testing of the general population.

The first general testing began only last week when the Central Outreach Wellness Center began a limited testing on Pittsburgh’s north side. Within two-and-a-half hours of opening, the center had run out of test kits.

On Monday, the facility resumed testing, setting up a drive-through screening and testing site at the Pittsburgh Zoo parking lot. Even these tests were

limited to people who showed signs such as fever and dry coughing. Of the roughly 600 tests, over 300 have now been processed with 6.9 percent testing positive for COVID-19.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention states that COVID-19 can live for 24 hours on cardboard and up to three days on plastic and metal surfaces.

“We don’t know if someone is sick in the houses we are picking up from,” said a worker who asked that his name not be used. “If someone is sick and they are throwing out all their Kleenex and things. We need protection so we don’t get it on ourselves and take it home to our families.”

“We’re not saying we won’t pick up the garbage. We’re just saying we want to be safe while we do it,” the worker said.

Sanitation workers are some of the lowest paid workers in the city, often making less than \$15 an hour. Over the past two decades, the Teamsters and American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) have collaborated with city officials to keep yearly pay raises to below inflation, and several years workers have received no increase at all.

“The city has the money to give us what we need. Just look at all the building going on. With rent and housing going up and up, it’s getting harder and harder to live in the city we keep clean,” a worker said.

Both the Democrats and Republicans have shown that they have no solution to the public health, economic and social catastrophe sparked by the pandemic. They have unlimited money to give to Wall Street and the banks while hospitals and health care providers cannot get the life-saving equipment they need.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party are working for the formation of rank-and-file workers committees to organize the struggle of workers for safe working conditions and to protect the lives and health of workers and their families, not the profits of Wall Street. We invite workers to contact us, to tell us what is taking place at your workplace and find out more about forming rank-and-file committees.

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