

North Carolina sanitation workers demand increased protection after co-worker's death

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On March 25, a sanitation worker in Raleigh, North Carolina, named Adrian Grubbs died after contracting COVID-19. Other public-service workers have since reported unsafe working conditions in both Raleigh and Charlotte, the state's two largest cities, and have threatened to strike if their demands for safer working conditions and extra hazard pay are not met.

As of Tuesday, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in North Carolina was 5,024, with 108 deaths recorded. The counties with the highest number of cases were Mecklenburg (993), where Charlotte, the county seat is located; Wake (501), location of the state capital, Raleigh; and Durham (297), where University of North Carolina (UNC) Chapel Hill is located.

Raleigh sanitation workers reported that on March 17, prior to the death of Grubbs, they had sent a list of demands to the mayor, city manager, and city council that included epidemiology work, testing, reduction in the number of workers in each truck, and additional hazard pay. Despite their city being one of the centers of the virus in the state, they had been weathering unsafe work conditions, such as being forced to jam up to four workers together in the cabs of their trucks.

Last week, public-service workers in Charlotte reported that the city began to cut back on safety measures that were initially taken to keep workers safe. That Monday, the city broke with its rotating schedule designed to minimize social contact and demanded that 200 waste-management workers report to the same building at once, putting them at increased risk of contracting or spreading the coronavirus.

The Charlotte workers also reported that they were not being supplied with needed personal protective equipment (PPE), such as masks and hand sanitizer. One worker related that they are typically given one pair of latex gloves per day and that they are only

receiving a measly 3 percent hazard pay. On that Tuesday, April 7, these workers made public demands for adequate PPE, rotating schedules with staggered shift start times, and double-time hazard pay.

Both Raleigh sanitation workers and Charlotte waste-management workers are "represented" by the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers (UE) Local 150, which has only passed on the demands of workers to their respective city administration. The March 17 demands made by Raleigh workers were accompanied by a threat to strike if they were not met, but even with death of Grubbs on March 25, the UE has not taken action.

The union treated the situation in Charlotte in a similar fashion, circulating a toothless petition to ask for more hazard pay in early April. A UE official declared that the workers cannot strike but the union is still hoping to come to a resolution with the city. Mayor Vi Lyles, according to NBC News affiliate WCNC, "declined to take a position on whether essential employees should receive hazard pay during the coronavirus pandemic, but she's open to other proposals."

Both the Facebook page and the web site of UE Local 150 have been notably silent on the situations in Raleigh and Charlotte since its "press conference" more than a week ago. There is no call on the workers to do anything more than sign petitions and beg local politicians for safe working conditions and adequate pay.

As of Tuesday, there had been 65,039 COVID-19 tests completed in North Carolina, placing it in the bottom tier of states for per capita testing, at just 6,404 tests for every 1 million residents. Testing is still being restricted to individuals in critical condition due to a shortage of supplies.

The state's Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) has instructed those who feel that they have the virus, yet are not presenting life threatening symptoms, to stay home and not seek out testing.

The NCDHHS web site reads: "For people with mild symptoms who don't need medical care, getting a test will not change what you or your doctor do. Testing is most important for people who are seriously ill, in the hospital, people in high-risk settings like nursing homes or long-term care facilities, and healthcare workers and other first responders who are caring for those with COVID-19."

Drive-through testing is being conducted throughout the state by both public and private organizations, yet the fluctuation of vital supplies has caused some sites to temporarily close. Health officials claim they are actively working to acquire supplies and reopen these sites as well as implement new sites in more-remote areas. The shortage of tests means that it is impossible to accurately assess the real spread of the virus in the state.

On March 30, Democratic Governor Roy Cooper signed an executive order declaring that everyone shelter in place and that only essential services stay in operation. The order limits the size of public gatherings to 10 people and directs all to stay at least six feet apart. On Thursday, April 9, the order was expanded to enforce these regulations within essential businesses, limiting the number of shoppers within stores. On Monday, all stores' occupancy was limited to no more than 20 percent of the store's fire capacity.

On March 16, before the stay-at-home order, Governor Cooper ordered the closing of all public K-12 schools, prompting administrators to look for remote methods to continue the learning process. UNC campuses also decided to move remaining spring and summer courses online. College students were notified of this development over spring break, and the majority of residential students have not been permitted to return to on-campus housing.

Following Governor Cooper's order on March 30, unemployment has risen drastically, with almost 500,000 claims filed as of last week. According to data from the federal Department of Labor, unemployment has risen by 4,282.7 percent in comparison to last year at this time, with North Carolina being the seventh

most affected state in the country. About one in four renters in Mecklenburg County missed paying rent in the first week of April.

In addition to the hundreds of thousands of North Carolina citizens who are losing their sources of income, there are estimated to be 321,000 permanent undocumented immigrants in the state. Every year, thousands of migrant workers travel from Mexico and other parts of Latin America to work in North Carolina's tobacco and sweet potato fields, with the state being the largest producer of these products in the US.

Agricultural workers such as these are expected to share sleeping quarters, kitchens, and bath facilities in barracks and small trailers, with many crammed into single rooms, often with multiple beds within feet of one other. Many of these labor camps do not have hot running water, proper cleaning supplies, or access to the Internet to keep up with the outside world. To reach these seasonal camps, many workers ride on crowded buses across the southern United States from the border. Social distancing and other preventive measures are nearly impossible in such labor camps, putting thousands of workers at risk.

Like most states, North Carolina is also experiencing high rates of infection among its prison population. The Butner Correctional Complex has 60 inmates and 23 staff who have tested positive for COVID-19. One of these inmates, an 81-year-old serving a 99-year sentence, died from the virus on Saturday. The prison contains 914 total inmates, who were only given masks during the last two weeks, after COVID-19 had already broken out within the complex.



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