

Striking sanitation workers in New Orleans replaced by prison laborers

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New Orleans sanitation workers were fired last week for demanding higher wages and better safety protocols. Dozens of workers went on strike protesting their low pay and hazardous working conditions amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which has ravaged the state of Louisiana.

At least twenty workers staged a protest on the morning of May 5, demanding hazard pay due to the immense risks involved in their work. Known as “hoppers,” the workers are dangerously exposed to immense health risks due to the consistent handling of trash and waste, and are not given proper protective equipment.

The private waste management company that employed the sanitation workers, Metro Disposal, responded to the demands by firing several of the striking workers. Now the company is using prison laborers as strikebreakers.

Gregory Woods, one of the sanitation workers who staged the protest outside the Metro Disposal offices, told local reporters that grievances had been intensifying for a long time, but that the coronavirus pandemic and the poor response by the company was the final straw.

“We are out here dealing with toxic waste every day,” Woods told local NBC affiliate WDSU. “They always rush us on the clock.”

The workers, who are paid just \$10.25 an hour to pick up trash sometimes from 4am to 4pm everyday, also demanded a pay increase to \$15 an hour.

Woods addressed the overall poor working conditions at Metro Disposal: “The trucks need to be fixed. They have hydraulic fluid leaking on us. We get paid late. Everything is just bad here.”

He also described the worsening working conditions during the time of the pandemic. “Out there, it’s more

piles we have to pick up. The cans are heavier, and it’s a hazard out there, dealing with that. Our job,” Woods continued, “is to keep the city clean. Give us better equipment and pay us better, because the hours are so long and it’s hot out here. And we’re dealing with the corona now.”

Some of the striking workers, who were hired through a temp agency contracted by Metro Services Group called PeopleReady, formed the City Waste Union, but the company has refused to negotiate with the organization. Instead, the company ordered the striking workers to vacate the premises, Woods said.

Metro Services Group has hired several prison inmates from nearby Livingston Parish to replace striking workers. According to Louisiana labor laws, prisoners convicted of non-violent crime can be hired as sanitation workers at only 13 percent of the usual hourly wage of \$10.25, essentially slave wages.

Facing popular anger over its strikebreaking operation, Metro issued a hypocritically statement, declaring: “Metro Services Group has long been an advocate of helping persons who had been incarcerated return to society in a meaningful and productive way. Metro makes no apologies for this policy as a core element of our commitment to being good corporate citizens.”

When asked about the use of inmates, Woods told local reporters: “They are really trying to use those dudes to do our job, and they’re paying them way less than they were paying us. They’re saving money, that’s all they are doing.”

The private company that supplies prison labor, Lock5 LLC, keeps up to 64 percent of the already substandard wages paid to inmates, according to a spokesperson. This is arranged through the state and the wage garnishing is used to cover Lock5 expenses.

So far, the city has refused to address the workers' demands. New Orleans Mayor Latoya Cantrell issued a statement toothlessly calling on Metro Disposal to provide proper safety requirements, but not much else. "Under the terms of the contract, Metro Services was paid over \$10.7M in 2019 to provide garbage and recycling collections in their service area. Metro is responsible for providing workers with the necessary items for their safety. This would include masks, gloves, etc."

Metro claims that workers were given masks and gloves for protection, but the strikers contend that the protective gear is inadequate. "They give us masks that are ruined after a couple days and nothing for the rest of the week," one of the workers said. "We get work gloves but no latex gloves, if we are cut, we can get infected."

Metro claims the workers are able to return to work at any time, but they will not commit to a rise in wages. "We stand by their right to strike," said the company spokeswoman, before adding: "Unfortunately, the financial terms of our contract with the city, which was awarded based on a low-bid process, does not leave room for a dramatic increase in hourly pay beyond the living wage in the city ordinance. And, again, the hoppers' claim of lack of access to (personal protective equipment) is false."

Local residents, as well as other essential workers also forced to work in dangerous conditions, voiced their support for the striking sanitation workers to the press and on social media. "I hope everyone strikes whose pay is less than the max unemployment benefits here. It's criminal that many make less," said one resident in support of the workers. "This city and many of the businesses should be ashamed. It is pitiful."



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