

New Orleans sanitation workers strike over pay and working conditions

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On Friday, dozens of sanitation workers for Republic Services launched a strike outside of the company's office in Metairie, Louisiana. The workers are members of the Teamsters Local 270, which has declared an "unfair labor practices" strike.

Members of the Local have been working without a contract since the last one expired at the end of June. A strike vote was authorized in early October, nearly a month before the strike actually began.

An official statement on the Teamsters' website published the day the strike began reads: "While Republic Services workers have been working tirelessly to pick up the trash from Hurricane Ida and keep the streets clean amid the pandemic, the company has been pushing to move its sanitation workers nationwide from an incentive pay model to hourly rates, which would cut some of Republic's longest-tenured workers' pay by nearly \$7/per hour."

Workers picketing outside the office reported to local news that they were concerned with low pay, poor health insurance and safety and equipment failures at the New Orleans facility. One sign read, "Our insurance is trash, just like the garbage we pick up. Get us off this welfare insurance!" Another, comparing the pay at other companies in the area to Republic, read: "Waste Management—\$26hr+, Waste Pro—\$26+, Republic—too ashamed to say."

Robert Williams, a repairman at the facility who is on strike, told local WGNO, "It's hell on wheels. Underpaid, trucks constantly breaking. I'm a one man gang in the morning. I handle all these trucks by myself."

Another worker, Ron Martinez, described the terrible working conditions. "Man, we got some of these guys out here pulling asbestos cans with dust masks and that's not good. Our trucks are always breaking down, leaking oil. It's just a bad situation." According to the Teamster's website, 18 of the company's 50 trucks that it operates in New Orleans are effectively inoperable.

Phoenix-based Republic Services operates in 41 states (including Puerto Rico) and has 35,000 employees, making it the second-largest waste management corporation in the

US. According to its 2020 annual report, the company made \$10 billion in revenue, paid \$621 million to shareholders and invested \$613 million in acquisitions. It has a market value of over \$40 billion and is listed in the top 300 of Fortune's list of "World's Most Admired Companies."

Jon Vander Ark, the company's president and CEO, received \$4.2 million in total compensation in 2019 according to SEC filings. This includes a base salary of \$775,000 plus millions more in bonuses and stock awards. The company's board of directors includes Thomas Handley and Michael Larson, COO and CIO respectively for both the personal and endowment fortunes of Bill and Melinda Gates.

Employee reviews on Indeed.com indicate that low pay, hazardous conditions, long hours and frequent equipment breakdowns are widespread across the country.

One employee wrote, "This job is probably one of the worst I've had. The trucks are unsafe. I actually had parking brakes fail on me and the door of the truck knocked me down, remind you it was wrote up previously and was still considered safe to operate. I've had trucks break down on me all day everyday and still be expected to get the route up even if it's near the end of the day. 60 hour work weeks, 12 to 13 hour days while driving trucks with seats that have barely any cushion left in it. The management is terrible: no communication, no sense of order, constantly having changes."

Another said, "Not enough employees to service customers. Not enough trucks in good condition. Spare trucks will break down before you get through the day. Sometimes before you leave the yard! Base pay is low for work conditions, stress and potential dangers involved."

The Bureau of Labor Statistics found that in 2018, two years before the pandemic, refuse and recyclable materials collectors had the fifth-highest rate of workplace injury-related deaths among civilian occupations.

Across the state, 51 percent of households lack the financial means for a "survival" budget, defined by the "actual bare-minimum costs of basic necessities," according to Louisiana Association of United Ways President and CEO

Sarah Berthelot.

COVID-19 has also heavily impacted the company's workforce in the state of Louisiana, which has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the country, a figure which correlates closely with levels of poverty. In response to widespread complaints from customers in Central, a town near Baton Rouge, that their trash was not being picked up, Republic spokesmen recently admitted that ten employees were affected by COVID-19 and two were hospitalized, reported Baton Rouge news station WAFB.

The strike by Republic workers is part of the largest strike wave in the United States in decades. This has taken the form of a growing rank-and-file rebellion by workers against decades of concessions contracts which the trade union bureaucracy has forced upon them. Across the country, the Teamsters have played a prominent role, enforcing contracts which guarantee miserable conditions at Republic and elsewhere. In 2018, the Teamsters rammed through a contract at UPS, after it had been rejected by a majority of voters, with wages for warehouse workers starting at only \$13 per hour, even less than at nonunion Amazon.

The Teamsters are clearly attempting to isolate the Republic strike and restrict its scope as much as possible. Its use of an "Unfair Labor Practices" label for the strike is designed to use federal labor law to prevent workers from raising economic demands, which the union is prohibited from raising in a ULP strike. As has happened at countless ULP strikes across the country, the union will no doubt seek to shut down the strike sooner rather than later on the pretext that Republic is now "bargaining in good faith"—that is, it has indicated its willingness to work with the union bureaucracy to enforce concessions.

This was indicated in remarks by Steve Sorrell, president of Teamsters Local 270, who said, "Republic Services workers have been doing their best to avoid a strike. We have been showing up at the bargaining table ready to negotiate with management and raising concerns critical to helping us clean up this community."

However, Republic workers are in a powerful position to expand their struggle and link up with the struggles of other sanitation workers and workers in other industries. The strike in New Orleans is only the latest in a string of local actions by Republic workers in recent years. Republic workers in Massachusetts, California, Georgia and Indiana launched strikes in August and September of 2019 over similar issues, to which Republic responded by bringing in company employees from other cities to act as strikebreakers.

Earlier this year, 130 recycling and yard-work drivers struck at Republic's operations in Washington state, who authorized a strike vote last May. Recycling worker

Margarito Gonzalez said at the time, "We drive the same trucks, do the same physically demanding work, yet have less in wages, health care, and retirement... [yet] Republic somehow found a way to pay its CEO \$110 million over the last four years, yet we have to scratch and kick for pennies."

The Republic strike also follows a job action by Metro Services Group sanitation workers in New Orleans last summer over low pay and hazardous conditions in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The company initially fired protesting workers, who only made \$10.25 an hour, and used prisoners as replacement labor. The National Labor Relations Board dismissed a complaint against Metro in December 2020, citing a letter by the company that affirmed the workers' right to organize and that they would not be fired when the strike ended.

Metro Services, one of the two main trash collectors in southeast Louisiana, egregiously mishandled the collection of storm debris in the area in the wake of Hurricane Ida, which made landfall on August 29. In response, direct city employees with New Orleans' Department of Public Works had to be called in to assist with their operations. Ten of the 13 workers in this department carried out a strike in late June demanding increases to their meager \$11.60 wages and the repair of faulty work equipment.

It is to these workers that striking workers must turn to enlarge and protect their strike. But this requires that workers develop their own organizations, rank-and-file committees, separate from and in opposition to the Teamsters bureaucracy. Networks of these committees are being built by workers across the country to oppose the unions' attempts to isolate and betray their struggles, and to unite workers across the country into a broader movement of the whole working class against poverty and social inequality.

For more information on how to form a rank-and-file committee, contact the *World Socialist Web Site* by filling out the form at wsws.org/workers.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact