

Teamsters union shuts down Southern California sanitation workers strike

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In coastal Orange County, south of Los Angeles, 400 sanitation workers went on strike on December 9 against Republic Services, the second-largest waste management firm in the US. The workers, members of International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) Local 396, had voted by a large majority in favor of a strike on November 23.

Following a declaration of a trash emergency by the city of Huntington Beach, one of the two hubs of the strike (along with the city of Anaheim), Teamsters Local 396 and Republic Services announced a tentative agreement on December 16, for workers in both Anaheim and Huntington Beach. Anaheim officials announced that residents would see the resumption of regular trash pickup on Thursday and Friday.

“After several bargaining sessions with Republic Services, Teamsters Local 396 has now reached a tentative agreement with the company which includes a commitment to cease engaging in unfair labor practices and a fair contract for workers at Anaheim and Huntington Beach,” declared the union.

No further details were given and no date for a contract vote was set. Allegedly, negotiations had stalled after their contract expired on September 30. At issue are management’s unfair practices and threats of reprisals against workers that engage in union activities.

As the Orange County strike was being settled, 250 sanitation workers, also employed by Republic Services, voted to strike in North County, the northern suburbs of San Diego, over similar issues. Again, the issue described by union announcements was “unfair labor practices” by Republic Services. Wages and working conditions were not mentioned as issues in either struggle.

However, workers in both regions do complain about

low wages, grueling 14-hour work shifts, the use of contingent labor as well as management harassment of workers that complain or present grievances. Hourly wages at Republic Services range from \$13 to \$21 an hour, and average \$19; not a living wage for Southern California households.

Adan Alvarez, a Teamster Local 396 official, reported that management let workers know that they would be “in trouble” if they appeared in interviews or images.

Republic Services, a Phoenix-based waste management company that operates across the United States, has been at war with its workers since the strike wave of 2019. On November 21, 2019, members of Teamsters Local 25 in Marshfield, Massachusetts, voted to end an eight-week strike and collectively resign from their jobs, despite verbal support from Vermont’s Senator Bernie Sanders. Following the struggle in Marshfield, strikes were seen in Washington, Georgia and California that same year.

In each case, these struggles were kept isolated by the Teamsters bureaucracy, which at every point declined to call a national strike against Republic or any other firms in the waste management industry.

The privately owned waste management industry is dominated by an oligopoly of seven companies that monopolize waste disposal, with revenues of over \$1 billion and tens of thousands of workers. These companies have become more concentrated during this last year, absorbing smaller competitors and generating super-profits for its stockholders and CEOs. The top four firms are: Waste Management Inc. (\$14.5 billion in 2020 revenues, or more than 20 percent of total industry revenues, 42,300 workers), Republic Services (\$9.4 billion, 31,000 workers), Stericycle (\$3.6 billion, 23,200 workers), and Clean Harbors (\$3 billion, 12,700

workers).

Key to this process is the industry's relationship with the Teamsters union. As this and other industries became ever more monopolized, the Teamsters and AFL-CIO gave up national contracts and national strikes, limiting their contracts to regional units of these megafirms in order to isolate struggles locally. This strategy has meant 400 workers on strike in Orange County and 250 workers voting to strike in San Diego—left to fight alone against conditions that are common to all Republic Services and waste management workers.

Currently, Republic has 7,000 Teamsters employees. It makes use of 16,000 trucks and operates 76 processing centers and 186 landfills.

In the recent words of John Vander Ark, Republic's president and CEO: 2021 "already represents the highest level of investments in acquisitions [of waste management firms] in over a decade. Our acquisition pipeline remains robust, with broad-based opportunities in the recycling and solid waste business and in our environmental solutions business." In addition, Republic has invested heavily in stock buybacks to boost shareholder returns.

All these profits are based on the super-exploitation of labor, which is made possible by the AFL-CIO and Teamsters.

The issues in this struggle are a microcosm of conditions faced by workers at Republic Services and across the waste management sector: speedups, poverty wages, piecework and contingent labor.

"Teamsters United Local 396," the Facebook page of the "Teamsters United" faction of the union, has yet to take a stand on the sudden end of the strike. Throughout the seven days of the Orange County strike, the Teamsters proposed no alternative to the Local 396 leadership, populating its page with empty statements such as, "Lets support L396 sanitation members. Keep strong brothers and sisters."

The results of this sudden and unexplained "settlement" with Republic Services is an indication that Teamsters members are in for more sellout contracts in more isolated struggles.

There is no doubt that this settlement, like the dozens of similar settlements this year by the Teamsters and other unions, is in the profit interests of big business.

Both the Teamsters and its sister organization,

Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), were involved in the recent national election that replaced the official James Hoffa Jr. leadership with the Teamsters United (TU) slate—Sean O'Brien for general president and Fred Zuckerman for general secretary-treasurer—based on "militant" promises to lead the struggle to organize Amazon workers and "take on" UPS. "[Y]ou better put on your helmet because this is a full-contact sport," declared Zuckerman in a debate, along with a number of other empty phrases promising to lead a fight.

The World Socialist Web Site analyzed this change in leadership a month ago.

The victory of O'Brien and Zuckerman (69 percent of those who voted, versus 31 percent for the official candidates), which took place under conditions of very low turnout by rank-and-file workers, is part of a bureaucratic strategy to paint new faces on the corporatist policies of the Hoffa leadership.

That groups such as the TU and TDU, as well as the pseudo-left, threw their support behind O'Brien and Zuckerman must serve as a warning to all workers: the lesson of the struggle against Republic Services is that rejection of the TU/TDU "reform" of the Teamsters is required. The construction of rank-and-file committees in waste management and in every division of the Teamsters is urgently needed to carry out the struggle for wages and working conditions on a national level, to nationalize monopolies and giant firms such as Republic Services and place them under workers' control.



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