

San Diego sanitation workers continue strike for wages and safe working conditions

Melody Isley**28 December 2021**

Sanitation workers at Republic Services in Southern California are continuing a strike for safe workplace conditions and a livable wage. Republic Services is an Arizona-based nonhazardous waste disposal company, with more than 35,000 employees who carry out waste collection for residential areas and commercial businesses across the United States.

In San Diego, some 300 workers remain on strike since December 17. These workers are part of the Teamsters Union Local 542 and take care of trash pickup in Chula Vista, Bonita, Eastlake and some neighborhoods of San Diego County. Their strike came on the heels of a strike by Republic service workers in Orange County, who went out on December 9th. Following discussions between the company and Teamsters Local 396, a tentative agreement was reached on December 16th. Just one day after Local 396 had ended the strike in Orange County, Republic workers in San Diego County began their action.

Like their fellow workers in Orange County, San Diego Republic workers face low wages, grueling 14-hour shifts, staff shortages, and management harassment. The strike has caused delays in garbage collection during the holiday season, and a great deal of complaints by local politicians and business owners.

Workers are demanding new vehicle and equipment improvements, a livable wage, adequate staffing, reasonable workloads, and improved safety conditions. Workers held a rally on December 26th following continued negotiations by the union and Republic.

The San Diego strike is part of a larger movement of both sanitation workers and the global working class in general. According to the Teamsters, contract negotiations with Republic are currently taking place in eight locations: San Diego; San Francisco; Stockton, California; San Jose, California; Richmond, California;

Seattle; Pittsburgh; and New Orleans.

In November, refuse collection workers across the United Kingdom began similar strikes, demanding better wages and safe conditions as COVID-19 spreads unabated among the British working class. All over the world, sanitation workers face unsafe conditions, low pay and overwork, and the unions representing them have enforced contracts with wage increases below the rate of inflation.

In an interview by local news at a rally on Sunday, one Republic driver explained, "We're ready to stay here for however long it takes," and that he and his coworkers are prioritizing a fight for workplace safety, especially regarding unsafe and outdated vehicles and equipment, and COVID-19 measures. The worker went on to share his frustration with the fact that their demands had not yet been met, and that his community is being stressed by the cessation of sanitation services.

The media has been quick to highlight frustrated residents and business owners who have been forced to take their own trash to the landfill or are watching it pile up and wash away as heavy rains hit the region.

While the workers show determination to fight for better safety and working conditions, the pro-corporate Teamsters union is working to isolate San Diego workers from their counterparts in Orange County in order to enforce concessions. San Diego sanitation workers have been given details of a new offer that Teamsters Local 542 had agreed to, but many workers indicated they would reject the offer which they deemed "disrespectful," and made clear their disapproval, demanding that negotiations continue until their demands are met.

Republic Services is the second largest waste management company in the United States. It has also been engaged in frequent struggles with its workers

since 2019. But despite encompassing up to 20 percent of Republic’s total workforce, the Teamsters continue to refuse to carry out a national strike against Republic and other waste management companies.

Figures from the local Democratic political establishment have feigned support for the strike, and pickets have been attended by San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria, Supervisor Nathan Fletcher, and Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez-Fletcher, to name a few. Despite these photo ops, they oversee a highly socially unequal city with the fourth highest rates of homelessness and thirteenth highest of poverty in the country. They have also worked to turn the San Diego Convention Center into a jail for immigrant children, supporting the Biden administration’s continual imprisonment of children. These “progressive” Democratic party officials also kept schools open during the pandemic and at every instance prioritize corporate interests over public safety.

This is a local manifestation of the strategy of the Biden Administration and the Democratic Party nationwide to use the services of the union bureaucracy in suppressing the growth of opposition in the working class and enforce substandard contracts. The Teamsters union occupies a central place within this strategy. This summer, it announced it would undertake a national campaign to expand its presence into nonunion Amazon, where it would bring workers the “benefits” of collective bargaining agreements which are as bad as or even worse than what currently exist at the low-wage employer. Warehouse workers at logistics competitor UPS, who are members of the Teamsters, are part-timers who start out at only \$13 per hour, under the terms of a contract which the union “ratified” in spite of a majority “no” vote in 2018.

The election of new union president Sean O’Brien this fall, with the supporter of the pseudo-left opposition group Teamsters for a Democratic Union, is an attempt to overcome the discrediting of the Teamsters by decades of sellouts and its notorious thuggishness. But O’Brien is himself a former ally of his predecessor, James Hoffa Jr., and is widely hated for his use of threats of physical violence against his opponents. O’Brien was elected amid the lowest voter turnout since the union switched to direct election of its top officers in the early 1990s.

The struggles of waste management workers in

Southern California cannot be left in the hands of the Teamsters, which functions as an agency of management. Instead, waste management workers must begin building their own independent rank-and-file committees, where workers can fight for their own interests, untethered from the corporatist relations between the trade unions and the corporations.



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