

Las Vegas sanitation workers vote to strike

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Last week sanitation workers employed by Republic Services in Las Vegas, Nevada, voted to strike the company once their contract expires on May 31. Republic Services employs 1,400 sanitation workers in the Las Vegas region, out of 7,000 workers across the US. A lengthy strike in Las Vegas would seriously impact this city's tourist industry.

In a letter to its members, Local 631 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) presented the company's demands for a five-year contract. These include a yearly 2 percent raise. Given the current inflation rate of 8.3 percent, this would result in Republic workers sustaining a 6.3 percent wage cut in the first year of the contract and an approximate 20-30 percent cut by the end of the five-year proposed contract. The company is also demanding cuts in pensions and health benefits, plus tightening absenteeism and disciplinary rules.

On May 15, IBT General President Sean M. O'Brien spoke at an online call-in for all Teamsters at Republic Services on the contract struggle. O'Brien said, "I've got a real personal problem with Republic Services. We battled them 120 days in the streets to get a contract in Boston. The only way they will listen is by demanding our worth."

This is empty rhetoric from the new Teamsters president who enjoys the closest ties to the corporate and political establishment. O'Brien recently made trendy *Boston* magazine's elite list of the 100 Most Influential Bostonians, a list of Democratic Party politicians, CEOs, media personalities and oligarchs. "The former head of Boston's Local 25 and close ally of U.S. Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh, O'Brien will be a crucial union advocate, particularly as the Massachusetts film industry expands," said the magazine.

At the Local 631 membership meeting, held last week, Chuck Stiles, the Director of the Teamsters Solid

Waste and Recycling Division, said, "Republic Services will stop at nothing to bust the union. Their behavior during negotiations with Local 631 shows they have learned nothing the past year. Republic workers are fed up. They've had enough. All across the country, our members are fighting back and telling this company they're not going to take it anymore..."

In fact, Republic Services has learned a lot during the past few years as the IBT has repeatedly capitulated to its demands in Boston, San Diego and a number of other cities.

In 2019, Republic workers in Local 25 in Boston carried out a 120-day strike. The IBT isolated the struggle, refused to mobilize other Republic workers, or provide the necessary financial support for its striking members. As a consequence, the strike was defeated and many IBT members lost their jobs. The local at the time was headed by none other than Sean M. O'Brien who, at the time, acknowledged defeat and called it, "*just one battle in a long war that we will win.*"

In January of this year Republic workers in San Diego were subjected to the same sell-out agreement scenario after a month-long strike. The 250 members of San Diego Teamsters Local 542 were forced to agree to the same terms they had rejected a month earlier due to the deliberate isolation of their strike by the union, and the company's threat to terminate their health benefits.

The Teamsters kept the striking Republic workers separated from other sanitation workers in contract negotiations with the company in at least five other cities in California as well as Seattle, Pittsburgh and New Orleans. The day before San Diego sanitation workers went on strike, sanitation workers in nearby Orange County were forced to end their walkout against Republic Services.

While the strikers had support from Republic workers in Seattle, Washington and neighboring cities who held

“work stoppages” in solidarity with San Diego, there were no further such actions organized by the Teamsters, despite the fact that the union admitted that Washington state workers made more money and had better health care and retirement coverage than workers in San Diego.

The Teamsters and other unions have kept sanitation workers on the job throughout the pandemic, despite the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and the spread of infections and death.

In March 2020, several hundred sanitation workers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania carried out a wildcat strike in defiance of the Teamsters to demand PPE and other protections after the wife of one of the workers tested positive for COVID-19. Throughout the walkout workers angrily confronted Teamsters Local 249 officials who were trying to get them back to work.

This well-documented record of betrayal and defeat illustrates the need for Las Vegas sanitation workers to break free from the pro-corporate Teamsters and build new organizations of struggle.

What is essential for Las Vegas sanitation workers in order to obtain livable wages and working conditions is to take their fight out of the hands of the corrupt Teamsters by forming a rank-and-file committee. This committee, democratically controlled by workers, should draw up demands to win substantial raises and cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) to protect incomes from surging inflation, along with other improvements in benefits and working conditions. Preparations should be made to launch a strike and reach out to other workers—sanitation, truckers, teachers and health care workers—and unite in common action.



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