

Australia: Sydney garbage collectors strike over pay and conditions

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8 February 2023

Rubbish collection workers based at Cleanaway's Hillsdale depot in eastern Sydney, New South Wales (NSW) struck for 24 hours on Tuesday as part of a dispute over a new enterprise agreement.

The company has proposed a four-year deal, backdated to July 2022, containing 5 percent nominal pay rises in each of the first two years and 4 percent per annum in the third and fourth years.

With the official inflation rate at 7.8 percent, and the real cost of basic goods and services, including food, fuel and utilities, soaring more than 10 percent in the past year, Cleanaway's miserly offer will see workers fall further and further behind the rapidly rising cost of living.

Under contract with the City of Sydney Council, Cleanaway collects residential and public garbage and recyclable material in the CBD and surrounding suburbs. The refusal of Cleanaway and the council to meet workers' demands meant some 35,000 bins were not emptied on Tuesday, with some residents still waiting for their rubbish to be collected.

The Transport Workers' Union (TWU) claims the Hillsdale workers are the lowest-paid at any Cleanaway depot in Sydney, earning around \$4 per hour less than their counterparts elsewhere. Entry-level workers are paid just \$26.14 per hour, while Level 7 drivers, responsible for training and supervision, earn just \$34.65 per hour.

TWU NSW secretary Richard Olsen said Tuesday it was a "disgrace" that workers' last pay rise, in July 2021, amounted to only around 60 cents. He failed to add that this meagre 2.5 percent "rise," along with the original low wage to which it was applied, was the result of an enterprise agreement brokered by the TWU bureaucracy in 2019.

Cleanaway is also seeking to increase the maximum

length of an ordinary shift from 8 to 12 hours, avoiding overtime rates—currently time-and-a-half for the first two hours, then double time—and slashing workers' take-home pay. This is of particular significance because the depot is "30–40 percent understaffed," according to the TWU.

This was the third stoppage at Hillsdale this year. Although workers voted overwhelmingly for strike action of up to a week, the TWU bureaucracy has limited them to sporadic stoppages, designed to cause minimal disruption to Cleanaway and the council.

The union leadership has also deliberately isolated this dispute to a single depot, despite the fact that Cleanaway workers in multiple Sydney depots and around the country are also striking against attacks on their wages and conditions.

At Hillsdale, the TWU is seeking to channel the anger of workers behind plaintive appeals to the council, which Olsen said "stands condemned for reaching such an agreement with Cleanaway." This is a deliberate diversion to conceal the TWU bureaucracy's responsibility for negotiating the existing enterprise agreement.

Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore is not concerned for the workers, or even the residents now threatening to withhold their rate payments over the substandard rubbish collection service provided by Cleanaway, not just during the strike, but for many months. Her primary worry, expressed today in a Twitter post, is avoiding damage to Sydney's reputation on the "global stage."

Olsen called on the council to urge the company to "sit with the union and find a compromise deal that will get everybody back to work." This amounts to a promise from the TWU leadership that it is more than ready to betray the striking workers, it just needs a deal

it can sell.

Another post by Moore, on Tuesday, indicates that this operation is already underway. The Lord Mayor wrote: “Cleanaway advised the City of Sydney that it has met with representatives of the TWU and offered an improved pay increase, with workers offered an immediate 10% pay increase and guaranteed year on year increases from here on.”

Such an offer would not match the rising cost of living since workers last received a pay rise in July 2021, let alone elevate their wages to even the inadequate levels existing in other Cleanaway facilities.

While simultaneous 24-hour strikes were held at Hillsdale and Erskine Park on January 27, this show of solidarity was orchestrated by the TWU leadership to cover over the divisive content of the campaign. The demand for “Same Job, Same Pay” is designed to limit the scope of workers’ demands to the “best” existing wages and conditions, drive a wedge between the exploited and the slightly more exploited, and prevent a unified fight to improve the situation for all workers.

Workers based at the company’s Erskine Park facility in Western Sydney struck again today in opposition to Cleanaway’s attempts to slash overtime pay and introduce a seven-day work week.

The TWU leadership has not publicly advanced a concrete pay demand in either dispute, despite holding numerous press conferences. Instead, Olsen and other senior bureaucrats have issued vague calls for a “fair go” and a “reasonable outcome.”

Cleanaway workers be warned—the reliance on such platitudes is a sure sign that a sell-out is being prepared. A rotten, sub-inflationary deal will be portrayed as a “win” by the union bureaucracy, on the basis that management agrees to back down on its assault on other conditions.

Over the past year, the TWU bureaucracy has already rammed through sell-out deals at several facilities. The content of these agreements belies the union’s claim to be fighting for real wage increases or even pay parity among Cleanaway workers.

Workers in Rockhampton and Gladstone in northern Queensland were signed up to a four-year deal containing 2.5 percent per annum nominal pay rises that will leave top-level drivers earning just 22 cents per hour more in mid-2025 than their Hillsdale counterparts do now.

In Central West NSW, Cleanaway and the TWU stitched up another 2.5 percent per annum pay “rise” deal, although in reality it amounts to far less. While the agreement runs until August 2025, workers will receive their last nominal pay increase on December 1, 2023, at which time they will be earning less than those on equivalent pay classifications at most Sydney facilities are currently paid.

Cleanaway workers in Darwin will receive nominal pay rises of just 3 percent in 2023 and 2024 under a union-management deal imposed in September.

The reality is that Cleanaway workers everywhere are under attack, with numerous ongoing disputes around the country, including strikes, over the slashing of real wages and working conditions.

Workers cannot fight this onslaught within the framework of a union bureaucracy that has collaborated time and time again to impose the demands of management for wage cuts and “productivity,” i.e., profit increases.

Instead, workers need to take matters into their own hands and form their own organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees. Through these committees, workers themselves can democratically develop demands based on their actual needs, not what the union leaders say is possible.

To fight for these demands, workers will need to break the isolation imposed by the bureaucracy and link up with their counterparts, elsewhere at Cleanaway, throughout the transport industry and the broader working class.



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