

“With this economy, we can’t survive”: Hundreds of public sector workers strike across Orange County, California

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Over 465 government workers with Teamsters Local 952 walked off the job on Oct. 13 against the County of Orange in Southern California. On the same day, county officials filed an unfair practice charge with the California Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) charging that the union is illegally obstructing operations.

They are seeking an injunction, which may include a temporary restraining order against prohibiting the flow of traffic in and out of the facilities. All county facilities remain open and operational, but the walkout has begun to cause delays in services due to reduced staffing, filled in mainly by management personnel.

Issues such as low pay, staffing shortages and increased workloads, as well as retro pay to cover the months they have been working without a contract, which expired on June 25, are the immediate causes of the strike.

These workers fulfill several key operations within Orange County, such as landfill and waste disposal; animal shelter care; road, flood and storm preparation; beach and park maintenance; and repairs on county and first responder vehicles.

The landfill workers operate out of the Prima Deshecha Landfill in San Juan Capistrano, Frank R. Bowerman Landfill in Irvine and Olinda Alpha Landfill in Brea.

“With this economy, we can’t survive,” Sammy, an Orange County waste management worker for eight years, told the WSW. “And we’re trying to provide for our families as well. Not only that, but it’s been months that we have been without a contract.

“We’re just fed up. Some of us are coming down from Corona, Riverside, Los Angeles, and they don’t match our pay with the price of gas. They recently just severed our overtime for our gas mileage. That’s what we’ve had before and now they’re not paying us back our gas

mileage.

“The price of gas is insane. I live in Corona and that’s 60 miles I drive one way, every day. That’s the wear and tear of my car every day and the gas that we’re paying for.”

The much-needed maintenance projects to prepare for the historic Super El Niño forecast coming this year have placed these workers in a very powerful position to win their demands.

However, the Orange County Board of Supervisors has only offered a 3 percent pay raise for the striking workers and has rejected offering retro pay for the months that they have worked on an expired contract.

Sammy explained: “The reason we’re striking is because the board of supervisors decided to give themselves a 25 percent raise, that’s about \$49,000 a year extra, and then they are trying to justify and say there’s no money in order to lowball us and give us a smaller contract.”

While the California state government is dominated by Democrats, Republicans and Democrats often alternate political office in the County of Orange. Both parties are trying their best to avoid the parity clauses found in many other union contracts across the county.

These clauses stipulate that if any other bargaining unit within Orange County receives a pay raise of more than 3 percent, all other contracts with the county would receive the same pay raise.

This would reopen contracts for other public employees, such as the Orange County Employees Association (OCEA), which covers about 18,000 service workers, including nurses, social workers, health inspectors and other essential staff.

Therefore, any raise above the 3 percent threshold would have a ripple effect well beyond the 465 Teamsters

members who are currently striking. This means that all county employees have a stake in this struggle.

Despite this, the trade union bureaucracy, especially within the Teamsters, has done nothing to mobilize the membership within the County of Orange or even the Teamsters union itself.

In neighboring Los Angeles County, a three-day strike by 500 warehouse and delivery workers in IBT Locals 630 and 848 against Sysco's Los Angeles operations in Walnut ended on October 15, isolating the two workforces from each other.

The union bureaucracy will permit a strike to run long enough in order to vent out rank-and-file anger, then move in to impose a sellout contract and shut the strike down before it can develop into an independent movement of the working class.

Therefore, workers should assert democratic control over their strike by founding a rank-and-file strike committee, prepared to countermand any decision made by union officials which violates their will, including a premature end to the strike or contract proposals which do not include workers' demands.

Sammy explained the kind of work they do at this facility: "We process more than 9,000 tons of trash a day. Not only do we manage waste for the County of Orange but the surrounding counties as well. So we preserve all the trash here, compact it and then we generate methane gas with it. We then convert the methane into propane, and we power all of Irvine.

"We do have dangerous working conditions. Some of these guys are on top of machines, driving machines, so you never know what the outcome might be. The machine could break down, but everything's safely done here."

JB has worked for more than three years at this landfill. He said, "I work for a composting facility, so I make sure that all of our compost gets taken care of for all of our communities around here. We make our own compost, our own mulch, the whole nine yards.

"As of right now, the working conditions are manageable, but for what we get paid versus what we do, it definitely doesn't feel like it's enough. For example, if you work for public works and you go and fill potholes, you may get around \$30 to \$35 an hour. Here we start off closer to like \$20 to \$21 an hour. It's kind of a large discrepancy, and we feel like we definitely deserve a little more, especially for how much revenue we pull in for the county.

"I would say roughly around 70 percent of the revenue that comes in for the county comes from the landfills

themselves, just by tonnage and whatever else that we do here.

"The commercial drivers, that's where most of our money comes from. We deal close to maybe about 300, 400 tons, maybe even more in a day. For the rates that we have here, you can definitely tell that we make a lot of money for the county.

"I commute all the way from Fontana. That's about 55 miles, and that's just one way. I have to make round trips of about 110 miles a day just to be able to come out here and work. With the gas prices on an all-time high, it's just definitely not enough for what we do around here.

"Normally, I don't get into much politics, but in my personal opinion, it doesn't matter what side you choose. They're all wrong, they're all corrupt. Democrats, Republicans, whatever the case may be, you're always going to find, there's going to find somebody out there who's just going to screw you over some way, somehow.

"It's just as simple as divide and conquer. The more you divide the people, the more that they're bound to start fighting with each other instead of banding together and realizing that all of this is wrong. We should really be looking at our government and saying, 'What is wrong with you? Why is it that you are allocating all of this money to places that it doesn't need to go to when you should be taking care of us here at home?'

"We have the largest military system in the entire world. We have some of the highest military budgets anywhere else in the world. Somehow we always seem to come up short for our people. You can see it in everybody's faces and everyone in the country. There's a huge mental health crisis. There's a huge crisis in physical health. You can see there's a housing crisis."

A WSWs reporter pointed to the growth of mass demonstrations and strikes over the exact same issues in Spain, France, India and all over the world. JB said, "I agree. It's not just here. It's all over the world."



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