

Hearing into death of Baltimore sanitation worker reveals medieval working conditions

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Members of the Democratic Party-controlled Baltimore City Council held the first of a series of hearings into working conditions at the Department of Public Works on August 21, following the death of Ronald Edward Silver II. On August 2, Silver collapsed while working in extremely unsafe heat when temperatures soared above 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius), triggering a Code Red heat advisory.

For government officials, the hardly-advertised hearings were an exercise in face-saving. But this contrasted with the powerful opening testimony from Silver's mother, Faith Johnson. Flanked by family members, Johnson shared how she still wakes up every morning and out of habit to say goodbye to her son on his way to work. Her eldest child—"my favorite first," she said—Silver was the "pillar and foundation" of the family.

Silver, who was 36, is survived by both of his parents, a fiancée, sisters, children and other relatives and loved ones.

Following Johnson's gut-wrenching testimony, the council hearing largely settled into a typical pattern, in which DPW officials step forward to be chastised by local officials, the latter wringing their hands while doing nothing to change the conditions. However, some important factual material did emerge.

Deputy Inspector General Matt Neil provided a devastating overview of DPW facilities in his portion of the hearing.

The Office of the Inspector General visited 10 facilities over several weeks and found conditions at all of them resembling medieval dungeons. At Silvers' site in Cherry Hill, OIG inspectors found ice machines not working for over a year, with no working air conditioning or fans in the employee locker room. Hot water came out of the cold-water faucets. Moreover, the trash trucks had no working air conditioning.

Other site visits in June and July, including trips during trash collection routes, found employees were not given water, ice or Gatorade during their 10-to-12-hour shifts. One so-called "cooling station," set up outside the facility after

an earlier OIG visit, had thermostats reading between 83 and 85 degrees Fahrenheit (28-29 Celsius) at 6:00 AM in the morning before the sun even rose. The temporary air conditioning units installed were not working.

While DPW said it was providing bottled water and Gatorade to workers, in reality supervisors kept the water in locked areas rather than making it freely available. This prompted a council member to state that DPW was "rationing" water.

In the washrooms and shower areas, the OIG found toilet paper withheld by supervisors as a form of punishment or bullying. Filthy shower areas were oftentimes used as storage space.

DPW officials at the hearing said there are no regular deep cleans of the facilities and could not remember the last time they had occurred, if ever.

Silver is not the only DPW worker to die on the job in recent years. Almost exactly four years ago, in August 2020, DPW employee Donald Savoy, a 12-year veteran of the solid waste division, died while working his route. Two other city employees have died on the job since 2018.

At the hearing, DPW Director Khalil Zaied blamed the agency's internal "culture" for the state of working facilities and negligence that led to Silver's death. This formless claim was used to distract from the obvious, that increased funding, worker safety regulations or resources might address the situation.

The agency is severely understaffed and employees like Silver have been called to work for double and triple overtime for years, going back to before the COVID pandemic. It is not unusual for sanitation workers in Baltimore to be out past midnight completing their routes.

Sanitation workers in Baltimore have the lowest pay among DPW workers on the East Coast, earning less than McDonald's workers, making the words "wage slavery" vividly spring to mind. For reference, the city approved a budget of almost \$600 million for the Baltimore City Police Department in fiscal 2024.

Various other officials offered phony gestures of "shock"

at the conditions, while providing mealy-mouthed commitments to review procedures, improve facilities, and provide training for workers.

When Zaied told council member Odette Ramos that he visits DPW facilities “regularly” and more than any of his predecessors, she said it was “disturbing” that the director did not care to notice the lack of air conditioning or cold water, as well as the rationing of water and Gatorade by supervisors, which was found to have happened at every DPW facility.

Ramos brought up how \$20 million has been set aside since 2022 for facility and truck improvements, but the basic problems of a hazardous workplace have not been solved, calling it a “systemic issue we have to address in our city government. We put in incremental money for projects that will happen in six or seven years.”

Council members Antonio Glover and Zeke Cohen questioned why the DPW has signed an engagement agreement with law group Conn Maciel Carey, a firm notorious for defending companies in cases related to workplace fatalities, rather than investigating Silver’s death internally.

During the hearing, emotions were tense in the audience. At several points during the proceedings, those present in the two-story Du Burns Chamber reacted in real time to vent their frustrations. At one point, there was such an outburst of frustration from the upper gallery that Committee Chair Isaac Schleifer had to bang the gavel and call for order.

After the Council members took turns pointing the blame for the deplorable conditions that caused Silver’s death on the DPW administration and supervisors, officials from the City Union of Baltimore and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Maryland Council 3 gave a presentation on the need for heat standards in Baltimore City. There are currently no state or federal heat safety standards.

Despite this presentation, the only concrete resolutions agreed upon at last Thursday’s hearing were for members of the City Council and DPW officials to do “ride-alongs” with sanitation workers on their trash routes, and for DPW to hold more “safety meetings,” toothless gestures which will also likely go unfulfilled.

Notably, several members of the council are former DPW workers. Despite having firsthand experience, they said nothing about raising wages to recruit more workers and alleviate staffing shortages.

Regardless of their background or career history, the hazardous conditions at DPW are a product of the capitalist system which the Democratic Party defends. Far from being a problem of “culture,” unsafe workplaces such as DPW are an expression of the conditions that the working class in all

countries faces.

The decrepitude of the sanitation facilities only mirror the disregard for safety visible in other, more spectacular catastrophes to have occurred in Baltimore, such as the Key Bridge collapse earlier this year, a product of lax safety standards and a reckless pursuit of profit.

Members of the public were also able to speak and enter their public testimony into the record. The first person to speak was one DPW worker with more than 10 years of experience, Stencil McNair.

McNair said bluntly, “Everything you just heard him [Zaied] say—he’s lying.”

McNair denounced the AFSCME union, which is the collective bargaining agent for Baltimore DPW workers. “I’m representing the people that don’t believe in the union, human resources, or the administration, so it’s kind of sad to sit back and listen to some of the things they’re coming up with... I’m speaking for a whole, I’m not just speaking for myself.”

McNair testified that he was “completely ignored” two years ago when he almost died on the job. “Most of these people we have not seen until Mr. Silver died. We didn’t even know they worked here.”

McNair said the COVID pandemic has been “one of the worst times of my life. We sat back and watched how everybody got recognition—except for us. It was terrible. Even down to this day, we don’t feel that we’re being respected because of situations like this.”

“Even down to the union, people don’t know this—they have votes without us. Like Ms. Dorothy Brown and Trevor [Taylor, both of AFSCME Local 44], they got voted in without our vote. How did they become the President and Vice President without our vote. That just goes to show you the lack of engagement we have with these individuals above us.”

McNair said DPW workers are ready to prosecute a struggle against their conditions. “We’re coming,” he said, “We started a whole new movement, and we’re not going to stop until we see equality all the way round the board. And we’re going to continue to move in solidarity too, but try to understand, anybody that sits back and watches us get treated bad, you’re a part of the problem, and we’re going to get rid of you. It’s as plain simple as that.”



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