

Maryland sanitation workers strike over working conditions, low wages

Pete Salmon
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Over 70 sanitation workers at a company in Anne Arundel County, Maryland went on strike Wednesday to protest unsafe working conditions, lack of protective equipment and paltry wages.

The contract between the workers, member of Teamsters Local 570, and Ecology Services, a recycling and waste collection company, expired at the end of July. Ecology Services is contracted by five Maryland counties to handle curbside collection, and is one of five companies contracted by Anne Arundel County's Department of Public Works (DPW).

The strike affected curbside collection in several municipalities in the county, including Severna Park, Pasadena, Laurel and Odenton. The county has since arranged for other contractors to handle collection in those areas. According to the DPW, at least 37,605 homes have been affected by the strike comprising 22 percent of the total service area.

According to the local Teamsters leadership, the strike is "open-ended," however the company claims it expects normal collections to resume this week.

The workers began picketing outside the company's Pasadena location Wednesday morning, citing meager wages and safety issues that the company had not addressed. A news release published on the national Teamsters website stated that the company's trucks are "dangerously ill-equipped, lacking air conditioning, proper seating, and even seatbelts," with the company offering workers a paltry raise of 38 cents per hour.

One worker, speaking to the *Baltimore Sun*, said the cameras on the trucks, which allowed drivers to see what is going on from the back, were inoperable.

Other workers had complained about inadequate protective equipment. One trash collector told the local *Patch* that gloves were sparse and safety goggles were never issued to him. Another collector spoke of having

to supply their own ice, water and coolers because the company would not provide them.

The news release had reported an Ecology Services worker suffering from a head injury after falling from their truck due to heat exhaustion, but no further details were given, nor was the story reported in any major outlet.

The strike comes one month after the death of a Baltimore city sanitation worker, Ronald Silver II, while working as a garbage collector. Silver had been working in 105-degree heat on August 2 without air conditioning, water or breaks, and collapsed shortly after asking someone in a nearby home for water. Rushed to a hospital, Silver died of overheating.

It was later revealed that the Baltimore sanitation workers labor in conditions akin to medieval dungeons. "Broken air conditioning, inoperable water fountains and nonfunctional ice machines" in 100-degree weather is the norm for workers in sanitation, with management "rationing" and withholding vital and legally mandated supplies.

In nearby Anne Arundel County, workers are exploited under nearly identical conditions. Notably, the workers at Ecology Services are employed by a recycling firm which has been hired as part of the county's policy of relying on recycling instead of traditional waste disposal. Whether a company is "green" or not, the treatment of its workforce is equally ruthless.

Ecology Services has been awarded \$130.2 million in federal contracts since 2001, including \$6.2 million this year.

The Teamsters union leadership is fully complicit in allowing such conditions to continue.

Teamsters Local 570, which has more than 4,000 members, claims on its website to represent "workers

employed in a variety of industries, including Warehouse, Dairy, Bakery, Laundry & Linen, Brewery & Soft Drink, Solid Waste & Recycling, Professional & Technical, Passenger Transportation, and General Sales.” The union has made no attempt to mobilize its membership throughout the region to support these workers with sympathy actions, let alone seek to connect the struggle with workers nearby.

This is despite overwhelming sympathy toward the workers, with county residents replying beneath DPW service updates on social media with comments such as, “maybe we should treat our working class better.”

Another resident said, “They pay the guys on the back of the trucks \$100 a day and they only work 4 days a week. I told him that was criminal!!! I don’t blame them one bit” for striking. The resident said that sanitation workers “are expected to make \$400 a week work in today’s world.”

“I talked to a guy on the back of the truck,” he relayed. “He said he can’t even get a second job because after being out in 100-degree weather, he goes home and has to lie down. They don’t bring them water and are thankful when residents give them cold water.”

Chuck Stiles, director of the Teamsters Solid Waste and Recycling Division, called on the county to “step in and demand that Ecology Curbside Services present a fair contract that addresses and corrects its unsafe practices”—thus passing the buck to the county DPW and throwing themselves at the feet of the local government, which is indifferent to the plight of the workers.

A DPW spokesman told the *Sun* that the responsibility lies with the company to comply with the terms of the contract.

The strike in Anne Arundel County comes as 200 hotel workers at the Hilton Convention Center Hotel in downtown Baltimore joined a national strike involving over 10,000—one-quarter of the 40,000 workers represented by the UNITE HERE union impacted by contract negotiations.

If workers in any particular locality are to make headway, they must organize as a class as part of a broader struggle, overcoming the divisions imposed on them by their so-called “leaderships” in the trade union bureaucracy. The *World Socialist Web Site* encourages striking sanitation workers to write to us and begin building a rank-and-file organization as a part of the

International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to fight for their own interests.



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