

RECYCLING IN CINCINNATI: WHO DOES THE WORK? DO THEY GET A LIVING WAGE?

Whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity, and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity, and it has worth. One day our society must come to see this. One day our society will come to respect the sanitation worker if it is to survive. For the person who picks up our garbage, in the final analysis, is as significant as the physician. All labor has worth.

– Martin Luther King, Jr.: Speech to Striking Sanitation
Workers in Memphis, Tenn., March 18, 1968

Rumpke's St. Bernard plant is the final stop for the city's recyclables. Everyday, roughly 50 workers sort the garbage and recyclables that arrive at the plant. They separate plastics from cardboard, remove glass items, trash, and hazardous materials - including dead animals. The workers sift, sort, and separate. When these sorted materials leave the plant, Rumpke sells them to vendors for reuse. The workers make this recycling possible.

It's unpleasant work, but it's done on a contract with the city that brings Rumpke over one million dollars per year. (Together with other contracts Rumpke takes in over two million a year in city dollars.) Most of the regular workers at the Rumpke plant are hired through a temporary service, TLC. The TLC portion of the recycling staff receives \$7.00 an hour. From this rate TLC deducts a daily, mandatory transportation charge of \$7.00. TLC then takes additional deductions for equipment. The temporary workers receive no health insurance, paid time off, or retirement benefits. Their daily take-home pay is roughly forty dollars.

FLASHBACK TO 2003: THE LIVING WAGE COMES TO CINCINNATI

On February 1, 2003, City Council passed a living wage ordinance. The ordinance governs any employer who has a service contract with the city that exceeds \$20,000.00. Employees covered by the ordinance include those workers who spend any of their time fulfilling the contract. Employees of subcontractors, like TLC, are also included. The current "Living Wage" is \$10.70 per hour.

In the run-up to the vote, council member John Cranley said he thought a living wage was "very important" on moral grounds. "I do not want the city to be contracting with companies who don't pay their workers a fair wage. This sets the bar," he said.

DECEMBER 2007: LIVING WAGE VIOLATIONS UNCOVERED BY BLUE-GREEN ALLIANCE

The Blue-Green Alliance is a coalition of environmental and labor groups that have decided to work together on issues like recycling. As a result of Blue-Green meetings,

violations of the living wage ordinance were uncovered. Following this discovery, Blue-Green worked with the Day Labor Organizing Project (DLOP) to begin educating the community on these violations. As a result, word of the violations began to spread among the workers. Shortly after that, a complaint was filed with the city on behalf of the TLC workers who do the city's work but are denied the living wage.

In response to city investigations, Rumpke argued that its temporary workers only “remove waste materials from the total recycling stream.” According to Rumpke, the TLC workers perform this removal *before* the recyclables are “sorted” as required by the contract. It is unclear whether this was intended as a defense, or a confession. But, apparently, the city investigators took the Rumpke defenses at face value.

TEMP WORKERS STAND UP AT CITY HALL, SPEAK THEIR MINDS, ASK FOR LIVING WAGE COMPLIANCE.

On January 10, the workers went to City Hall to share their views in an informal meeting with city investigators and council members. Joining the TLC/Rumpke workers were DLOP, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), the AFL-CIO, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Sierra Club, and the Blue-Green Alliance. At this meeting several TLC/Rumpke workers described the process at the recycling plant. They also detailed their central role in receiving, sorting, and preparing the materials for shipment.

According to the workers, the contract is clear. The contract requires Rumpke to “weigh, sort, prepare, and transfer the Recyclable Materials to the buyer of the materials.” Furthermore, the term “recycling” is defined by the contract as “the series of activities, including collection, separation, and processing, by which products or other materials are recovered from the solid waste stream for use in the form of raw materials.” These are the things the TLC workers are hired to do everyday. This is what they conveyed to city leaders on January 10th.

What's more, at the January 10th meeting, local Sierra Club volunteers confirmed the workers' account. As one volunteer put it, “I've been out to the Rumpke facility on tours given by the League of Women Voters. I'm here to tell you that what these men describe is the truth. Cincinnati couldn't recycle without them.”

After all this was presented to the city, Eddie, one of the TLC workers stood up and asked point blank: “am I a covered employee? You've heard us describe the work we do. Now we want to know, do we deserve a living wage?”

How did the city leaders answer? Mostly they squirmed. No one gave a straight

answer. But they did promise to continue the investigation. In other words, Rumpke's position was rejected, at least for now. But Eddie and the workers were not impressed. They felt like the Rumpke side was getting a pass. Eddie compared it to bad officiating: "why should all the calls go to the home team? The refs should look at both sides and make a fair call."

And that's how DLOP sees it too. This may be Rumpke's home town. They may have a monopoly on recycling, but they shouldn't get all the calls going their way. Until the citizens of Cincinnati force TLC, Rumpke, and City Hall to uphold the city's commitment to a living wage, it's a safe bet that the calls will keep going Rumpke's way.

Eddie had more to say, but didn't have time to go any further. It was getting late, he needed to change clothes, report to TLC, and put in another shift at Rumpke.