

POOR WORKING CONDITIONS, POVERTY WAGES AND LACK OF RESPECT IN THE WORKPLACE FORCING THEIR HANDS, WORKERS SAY

NEW YORK, Nov. 12, 2013 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- Hundreds of Employees of the largest private contractors at area airports joined a raucous LaGuardia Airport rally to call the public's attention to the prevalence of poverty wages and poor working conditions that they say are creating a crisis for workers and the traveling public at the airports.

"Supporting yourself on \$7.90 is hard," Shareeka Elliott, a terminal cleaner for Airway Cleaners at JFK told the crowd. "Supporting yourself and two growing girls is nearly impossible. My take home wage does not begin to cover bills, daycare, and food for me and my daughters. I feel like I'm drowning in debt."

Americans enter the busiest holiday travel season of the year with a growing sense of crisis at airports as workers complain they are not being heard despite delegations to contractors, terminal operators and airlines at airports.

"These are hard-working men and women doing some of the most vital jobs to keep our airports running smoothly and safely," 32BJ SEIU President Hector Figueroa said. "They should not have to live in poverty to do it. Their families should not have to live without health care because they happen to be working at our airports."

Workers found supporters in city elected leaders, including Manhattan Borough President and City Comptroller-elect Scott Stringer, State Sen. Jose Peralta, City Council Speaker Christine Quinn and others who joined the entire leadership of 32BJ SEIU at the rally.

"If airlines can find the cash for terminal expansions, then surely they can pay an honest, living wage to the hard-working airport employees that help keep the busiest transportation hubs in

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Written by Australian Business

the nation flying safely and smoothly," Stringer said. "I am proud to stand with the men and women of 32BJ in calling for uniform standards for the fair wages, benefits, and improved working conditions they need and deserve."

Speakers at the rally pointed out that many airlines recently announced record 3rd Quarter profits while workers have to rely on public assistance for food, rent and health care just to be able to work at the airports.

These workers, Speaker Quinn said, play a critical role in securing the safety of millions who pass through our airports each year and they deserve to be treated fairly and that means paying them a living wage.

"We can't stand by while low wages and no benefits lead to an astronomical turnover rate that puts lives at risk," Sen. Peralta said. "As we have seen in San Francisco, fair wages for airport workers and strong profits for their employers are perfectly compatible. Let's come to a fair deal, and keep this airport running at full capacity."

Tuesday's rally was the largest gathering of area airport workers at any one time as one after the other, employees of Airway Cleaners, PrimeFlight, AirServ and Aviation Safeguard came forward to say they are fed up with not being heard and that they are considering options to bring their plight to public attention. They were joined by a delegation of fast food workers whose campaign to improve standards for wages and benefits in that industry is strikingly similar.

The crisis, workers say, is caused by low-bid subcontracting by airlines of security, cleaning and other functions at John F. Kennedy, Newark Liberty International and LaGuardia airports to private contractors who pay poverty wages—significantly less than those directly employed by the airlines and the Port Authority.

For instance, a new report from the University of California, Berkeley, found that airlines outsourcing of baggage porter jobs has more than tripled over the last 20 years – to 84% from 25% -- while the real wages of both directly hired and contracted workers dropped by 45%, to \$10.60 from over

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\$19

an hour. At

New York

area airports, the pay is even worse, with a median wage of

\$8.00

an hour. Workers who help travelers, clean aircrafts and provide security at airports are paid as low as

\$7.25

per hour, lack health insurance, paid sick leave and other basic benefits. The report also found that 37% of cleaning and baggage workers live "in or near poverty."

After years of workers demanding better pay and benefit standards from airlines and airport contractors, residents of the tiny city SeaTac (pop. 26,667), home to the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, took action. They voted on an historic ballot measure to grant 6,000 hospitality and transportation workers at or near Seattle-Tacoma International the nation's highest minimum wage, \$15 an hour. While votes are still being counted in that election, momentum is gathering around the country to raise minimum wage for low-wage workers.

With more than 145,000 members, 32BJ SEIU is the largest property service union in the country.

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