

## Sanitation Workers in the City of Buffalo

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### General Job Description

Sanitation workers, also referred to as refuse collectors, collect trash from homes and businesses. They either lift the garbage cans themselves or use a hydraulic lift for dumpsters. The work is physically demanding and repetitive. Sometimes they have to lift large heavy objects, such as furniture or large kitchen appliances. They normally work an 8 hour shift that often begins between 5 a.m. and 6 a.m. They usually work regardless of the weather.<sup>1</sup>

### Education

The basic requirement is to be at least 18 years old and physically capable of performing the work. However, a high school diploma or GED is generally preferred.<sup>2</sup>

### Pay scale

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the national mean wage estimates for sanitation worker are as follows:

<u>Percentile</u>	<u>10%</u>	<u>25%</u>	<u>50%</u> <u>(Median)</u>	<u>75%</u>	<u>90%</u>
Hourly Wage	\$8.62	\$11.23	\$14.93	\$19.14	\$24.68
Annual Wage	\$17,930	\$23,360	\$31,050	\$39,820	\$51,330 <sup>3</sup>

The median wage for a sanitation worker in the Western New York region is \$33,280.<sup>4</sup>

## Hazards of the job

Workers can be exposed to fumes, odors, harmful materials and chemicals, and dangerous machinery.<sup>5</sup> They can be severely burned or killed by handling hazardous materials.<sup>6</sup> For protection, they usually wear gloves, hardhats, and other safety clothing.<sup>7</sup> Lifting large, heavy objects can cause some workers to throw out their backs or strain other body parts.<sup>8</sup>

Sanitation workers have died while on duty. In January 2010, a New York City sanitation worker died from being pinned between a tractor trailer and his garbage truck.<sup>9</sup> Between 2003 and 2005, seven sanitation workers died while collecting trash in upstate New York.<sup>10</sup> One sanitation worker fell off the back of the truck and was run over by its wheel.<sup>11</sup> Two other workers, on separate occasions, fell off a moving garbage truck and died from striking their heads.<sup>12</sup> Another sanitation worker slipped beneath the truck's rear wheels, and the truck rolled over him.<sup>13</sup>

## The Memphis Sanitation Strike of 1968

The Memphis Sanitation Strike began on February 12, 1968 when African-American sanitation workers walked off the job due to deplorable conditions. They lived below the poverty level while working full time, and 40% of them qualified for welfare assistance. They lacked employee benefits such as health insurance, pension benefits and paid time off, along with simple amenities such as a place to shower and eat.<sup>14</sup> “They carried leaky garbage tubs which spilled maggots and refuse on them, while white supervisors called grown men ‘boy’ and sent them home without pay for the slightest infraction.”<sup>15</sup>



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. traveled to Memphis to support the strike as part of his Poor People's Campaign.<sup>16</sup> It was during this campaign that Dr. King was fatally shot on April 4, 1968 as he stepped outside of his motel room.<sup>17</sup> The assassination of Dr. King did not hinder the determination of the sanitation strikers, and the strike became a symbol of equal rights for the working poor and the African American community.<sup>18</sup>

Although sanitation workers' conditions have improved since 1968 with a higher pay rate and less degrading conditions, it is still considered a low wage profession, with many employees struggling to make ends meet.

## **Seasonal Sanitation Workers and the City of Buffalo's Living Wage Ordinance**

The City of Buffalo's Living Wage Ordinance was passed in 1999 and took effect in 2000.<sup>19</sup> The Ordinance provides that when the City makes contracts of over \$50,000 with employers, the employers would be required to pay a living wage to their workers.<sup>20</sup> In August 2003, the Ordinance was amended to make the City itself a covered employer, but the City never came into full compliance and continued to employ some workers, including 75 or so "seasonal" sanitation workers, at less than a living wage.<sup>21</sup> These "seasonal" workers work alongside permanent, unionized, civil service employees who do the same job and receive a living wage plus benefits. They are not truly seasonal, but rather a pool of exploited workers, mostly patronage hires, who work for six months, are laid off for a week, and then rehired.

In 2007, the City's seasonal sanitation workers were making around \$8 per hour without benefits when the living wage ordinance required them to be paid \$10.77.<sup>22</sup> After the Coalition for Economic Justice, a local non-profit fighting for the rights of low wage workers, pitched tents in Niagara Square, Mayor Byron Brown finally agreed to give the City's seasonal workers a raise to comply with the Living Wage Ordinance. As of January 1, 2010, the City's seasonal sanitation workers should be making at least \$11.87 per hour (the living wage rate is adjusted for inflation each year).<sup>23</sup>

### **Abraham**

Abraham is a 56 year old seasonal sanitation worker for the City of Buffalo and a board member with the Coalition for Economic Justice. He is a bright person with a no-nonsense personality and a dry sense of humor. He has been working at his current sanitation job for the past nine years. Although his job currently pays the City's living wage rate, he still struggles to make ends meet. The following is an interview I did with Abraham on March 9, 2010.<sup>24</sup>

### **What is the nature of your work?**

Each day I pick up trash from five different districts in the City of Buffalo. Plus I have to collect all the loose trash like couches, televisions, stoves, etc. I'm a seasonal worker, but I work year round in all weather. There's not much autonomy. I usually work from 6:30 a.m. to 12:30 or 1:00 p.m. I don't get any breaks or lunch time, but once my routes are complete, I



get to leave work with eight hours pay.

### **What are bad things about the job?**

I'm only supposed to pick up to 60 lbs, but totes or large couches can be over 100 lbs, and I have to pick them up anyway. Dirt in a bin can weigh over 200 lbs. The employers don't care and they make it known that we can be easily replaced. It's either do it or be let go. I don't like that I can be fired at any time.



Sometimes the trash can have diabetes and drug needles; contaminated blood. People renovate their homes and throw glass and nails in the trash. We can get bad cuts from this. The nails could be rusty. They don't put drywall or asbestos in trash bags, so it flies in my face when we empty the trash bins. Things smell bad with funny odors, and I don't know what it is. You don't want to wear a mask, though, because it's suffocating to work with a mask on.

Seasonal workers are only supposed to work for six months or less, but the City has me work year round. Seasonals are not unionized.

### **What do you like about your job?**

The only good thing is the hours. My route is can be easily done in 6.5 hours, but I still get 8 hours pay. If I'm done by 10:00 a.m., I can go home and get full pay.

### **How did your life improve after the Living Wage Ordinance took effect for seasonal workers in 2007?**

Before I was earning \$8.15/hour. I was living with my mother and paying her \$400/month in rent. I had no money left over once the bills were paid. The Living Wage Ordinance allowed me to make enough money to get my own apartment, buy more food, and have a TV – little things that most people take for granted. Now I have a few dollars left over and can breathe a little bit.

### **What are your current challenges of living with a low wage?**

Living week to week or every two weeks. My monthly rent is \$500 and every two weeks I get paid \$600. I have to pay for rent, car insurance, my car, gas, cable, electric, cell phone, food and hygiene products. I try to buy food to cover for the month. There's not much left once the bills are paid. Little money to socialize, etc.

### **What would a higher wage enable you to do?**

I currently make a little more than \$24,000 per year, but I have no benefits. No health insurance, paid holidays or holiday overtime pay. I would like to save money for retirement and to



own my own home. I would like to have equity to work with and to put some money in the bank.

**What would happen if you had to see a doctor or go to the hospital since you don't have any benefits?**

I haven't had to see a doctor except for the workers' compensation doctors. If I do, hopefully I can get welfare assistance, otherwise I am paying out of pocket, and I won't have enough money left for my other bills.

I had a torn shoulder, and my only option was Workers' Compensation. But it takes a month or two to get the MRI from the workers' compensation doctor, but I'm in pain now, so I have to work with a sore shoulder. I also hurt my back while lifting a couch. I was in pain for weeks and there was nothing I could do about it. If I take a leave of absence, it's for no pay, and I may not have a job when I return.

**What are your thoughts and feelings about your employer?**

My employer is the city, and I don't like my employer. People are trying to make a decent living and to have a decent lifestyle. The City steps in and kicks you and denies people who've been there all those years. It's horrible. Employees with relatives or friends working for the City get hired and move up in a short amount of time. I've been here over nine years, and the City chooses them over us who are more experienced.

**Does your employer follow all relevant laws?**



They follow their own laws. People with connections don't have to work and they get full pay. They'll send me on the heaviest run because they know I'll do the work, but the guy I'm with won't do the work because he has connections, and nobody cares. If I complain, the City will be happy to get rid of me. "You're a seasonal, know your place." I deal with this every day, not just sometimes.

**Would you like to stay in this occupation or move on to another career?**

I'm 56 years old. At my age, I'm not able to go into another career. They'd rather hire a young person.

**Are you on any public assistance, including Medicaid, food stamps, subsidized housing, HEAP, etc.**

No. I make a few dollars too much. I'm single and live alone. If I was living with someone or had children I would qualify, but as a single man I don't qualify on my salary.

**Do you need to work additional jobs?**

I used to work part time jobs, but I stopped because of my age. I don't want to run myself into the grave. I want a life. I want to be able to come home and enjoy my life.

**What is your educational history?**

I have a GED. I stopped high school at the 10th grade. I have a few college credits from Erie Community College and Genesee Community College. I didn't complete my Associates Degree.

**Do you like where you live?**

I live downtown. I like where I live for convenience sake. If my car breaks down, it's easy to get to work. I can hang out on the waterfront on a nice day. Visit the park area. Visit the casino. I own a car, so I can drive in all different directions if I need to go somewhere. But if I had the opportunity I would prefer to buy my own place.



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<sup>1</sup> *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11 Edition*. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 17 Dec. 2009. Web. 15 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos243.htm>>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Occupational Employment Statistics*. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 4 May 2009. Web. 15 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes537081.htm>>.

<sup>4</sup> *Employment Prospects To 2016: Western New York Region*. New York State Department of Labor. Web. 29 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.labor.state.ny.us/stats/descriptor.asp>>.

<sup>5</sup> *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11 Edition*. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 17 Dec. 2009. Web. 15 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos243.htm>>.

<sup>6</sup> *Confessions of a Sanitation Worker*. AOL: Advice and Resources, 21 Aug. 2009. Web. 15 Mar. 2010. <<http://jobs.aol.com/articles/2009/08/21/confessions-of-a-sanitation-worker/>>.

<sup>7</sup> *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11 Edition*. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 17 Dec. 2009. Web. 15 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos243.htm>>.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* and "Abraham." Personal interview. 9 Mar. 2010.

<sup>9</sup> *NYC Sanitation Worker Killed on the Job*. NBC New York, 26 Jan. 2010. Web. 15 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local-beat/NYC-Sanitation-Worker-Killed-on-the-Job-82701412.html>>.

<sup>10</sup> *Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (FACE)*. New York State Dept. of Health, Aug. 2006. Web. 15 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.health.state.ny.us/environmental/investigations/face/facts/sanitation.htm>>.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Memphis Sanitation Strike*. The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture, 2002. Web. 15 Mar. 2010. <<http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/imagegallery.php?EntryID=M082>>.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> *Teaching With Documents: Court Documents Related to Martin Luther King, Jr., and Memphis Sanitation Workers*. The National Archives. Web. 29 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/memphis-v-mlk/>>.

<sup>18</sup> *Memphis Sanitation Strike*. The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture, 2002. Web. 15 Mar. 2010. <<http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/imagegallery.php?EntryID=M082>>.

<sup>19</sup> Magavern, Sam. "In the Matter of the City of Buffalo: Summary of Facts and Law Prepared for the Hearing of the Living Wage Commission." Letter. 11 June 2007. MS. Buffalo, New York.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at page 1

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at page 7

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at page 1

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<sup>23</sup> *City of Buffalo Living Wage Commission*. City of Buffalo. Web. 29 Mar. 2010.  
<[http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/CityServices/Living\\_Wage\\_Commission](http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/CityServices/Living_Wage_Commission)>.

<sup>24</sup> "Abraham." Personal interview. 9 Mar. 2010.