



JUST JOBS FOR WASTE WORKERS

REAL SOLUTIONS FROM FRONTLINE WORKERS IN THE PRIVATE SANITATION INDUSTRY



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This report and underlying research were produced by members of the Transform Don't Trash NYC coalition, with Justin Wood of New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI), Rocio Valerio-Gonzalez of ALIGN: The Alliance for a Greater New York (ALIGN), and Alex Moore of Teamsters Joint Council 16 as lead authors.

The Transform Don't Trash NYC coalition is dedicated to transforming New York City's commercial trash industry to reduce waste and pollution, foster clean and healthy communities for all New Yorkers, and create good jobs. Members include the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance, ALIGN, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters Joint Council 16, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and New York Lawyers for the Public Interest.

INTRODUCTION: JUST JOBS FOR WASTE WORKERS

Private sanitation work is hard, and remains one of the most dangerous jobs in the nation. ¹

Since off-the-books employee Mouctar Diallo died under the wheels of a New York private garbage truck in November 2017, a brutal world of grueling overnight routes, difficult physical labor, harsh weather conditions, and exploitative employers has come to light. It does not have to be that way.

For workers, there is plenty of potential in the Commercial Waste Zone (CWZ) plan being finalized this year by New York City Council and the City of New York Department of Sanitation (DSNY).

The plan will reform the city's current private carting system, in which dozens of different carting companies compete in each neighborhood, running long and dangerous routes to pick up waste from scattered customers.

If the city assigns just one hauler to each commercial zone – and holds them to labor, environmental, safety, and pricing standards through a competitive bidding system – the policy can turn sanitation jobs into great jobs.

What follows are the illuminating experiences of six private sanitation workers, and our recommendations on how the CWZ policy could make life better for thousands of hard-working men and women in this industry while making the city safer and more sustainable.



*Mouctar Diallo
(Courtesy of Midjao Diallo)*

A SEVEN-POINT PLAN: KEY RECOMMENDATIONS OF THIS REPORT

- 1. Enact policies to create a level playing field where good employers and good unions can succeed.*
- 2. Include specific worker protection provisions in the Waste Zone contracting process.*
- 3. Use the Commercial Waste Zone policy to reward companies that implement a rigorous culture of safety and fairness.*
- 4. Assign one hauler to each commercial waste zone (exclusive zoning) to maximize both efficiency and safety.*
- 5. Prioritize hiring and job training for communities that are often excluded from good jobs.*
- 6. Set standards to create good, safe jobs at recycling, composting, and transfer station facilities.*
- 7. Support entrepreneurship and diversity in the recycling and diversion sector through minority and women-owned business enterprises (MWBES) subcontracting requirements and financial support to community-based sustainability efforts.*



New York City Council member Antonio Reynoso announces a bill against “sham unions”

1. ENACT POLICIES TO CREATE A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD WHERE GOOD EMPLOYERS AND GOOD UNIONS CAN SUCCEED.

Thanks to collective bargaining and membership in strong unions, private sanitation can be a stable, middle-class career, with decent benefits and a retirement for some workers. In general, data consistently show that membership in a democratic, legitimate labor union adds substantially to a worker’s wages and benefits.² But in New York City, many workers at low-road companies — which often install “sham unions” — have said that a shift can last up to a grueling 18 hours and involve as many as 1,000 stops, that they make as little as \$80 per shift, and often don’t receive health benefits.

A bill passed by the New York City Council in 2019 gives the City’s regulators the authority to investigate corrupt officers of sham unions that undermine workers’ rights. The next step is to be sure that regulators have the enforcement resources and tools they need, and that companies with a history of underhanded union-avoidance tactics are forced to compete fairly with responsible employers under the CWZ system.



JOHN ROJAS, THE BRONX, NEW YORK

*“I live in the Bronx and worked at Sanitation Salvage for almost two years. At first I wasn’t worried about my safety, or the conditions of work, or whether I was on the books or not. I just needed to put food on the table. **But I felt like I was killing myself for a paycheck. I worked in the cold, in the rain, with buckets of water in my shoes, and in the heat.** I wasn’t trained at all, and I never received any safety equipment. I started working as a helper, off the books, making \$70-\$80 a day working up to 17 or 18 hours per shift. I started work at 6:30pm, and we weren’t done until 11am. By the time I went to sleep it was 1pm, and I had to wake up again at 5pm or earlier just to have a little bit of time for myself and not go crazy. I did this six days a week. I had never had to work this much in my life.”*

*“Out of nowhere, these two guys showed up from some union called 741. The manager told us that we had to sign a paper and that we were represented by this “union.” I don’t think they would have gotten away with all of this if we had a legitimate union representing the workers. One day in December, I showed up to work and no one was there. The company closed their doors and didn’t even give the workers any warning. **They closed the company without paying us everything they owe us. The company owes me sick days, vacation days and much more. I gave a lot to this company. I spent more time on that garbage truck than with my girlfriend and family. We deserve justice.**”*

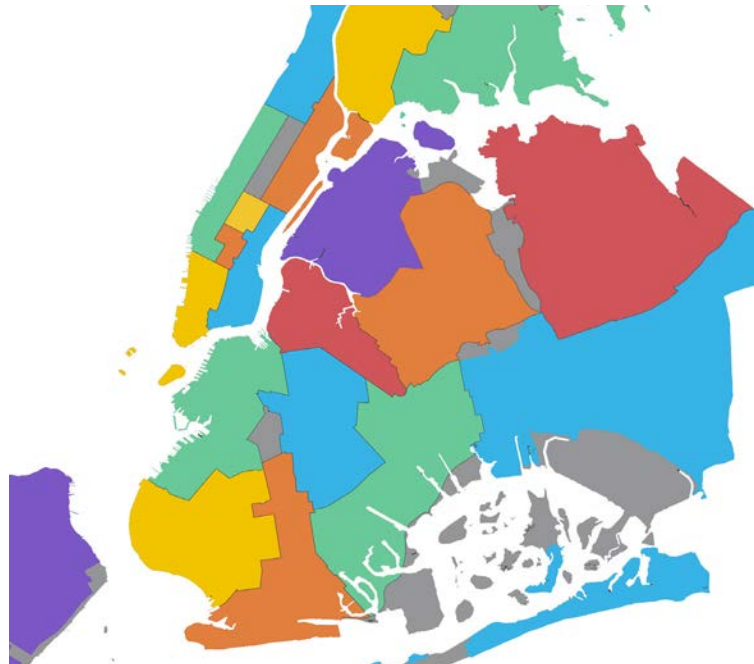
A close-up portrait of Anthony Carmona, a man with short dark hair and a goatee, wearing a green hoodie. He is looking slightly to the right with a serious expression. The background is blurred, showing other people and what appears to be a blue sign with white text.

ANTHONY CARMONA, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

*“I have been working in the private sanitation industry for five years now. The first two years I worked for a company in Brooklyn called Viking Sanitation. At Viking, I got paid \$120 a night, no matter how many hours I worked. **I had no health insurance. I was given no safety equipment to do the job. No boots, no gloves, no uniforms. Nothing.** When the workers got tired of dealing with the bad wages and working conditions we decided to join Teamsters Local 813. But once the boss found out about this, he started calling all of the workers into the office, one by one. Each day he gave workers \$20 cash and told us if we didn’t vote for the Teamsters, he would bring a union in for us that would be good for all of us. **When the boss is choosing your union, you know it is one of these fake unions.**”*

The boss knew I was a union supporter, so he cut my days from three days a week to two days a week. In the end, between the punishments and the bribes, the workers at Viking gave up on our dream of a union. But even after we lost that fight, the union still looked out for me. They got me a job at Waste Connections, where I am a member of the Teamsters.

*There is a big difference between working for a company that’s non-union and working for a company that has a legitimate union like the Teamsters. I make \$24 an hour and I work eight hours a night. They give me work gloves, a uniform, and everything I need to do my job. I have good healthcare and a retirement plan. I can take time off when I am sick. I can take vacation to relax and recover. **Above all, I am treated with respect, like a human being.** Every sanitation worker in New York City deserves to be treated like this. I hope that one day soon we all will.”³*



*Map of zones for
DSNY's proposed
zone system
(Courtesy DSNY)*

2. INCLUDE SPECIFIC WORKER PROTECTION PROVISIONS IN THE WASTE ZONE CONTRACTING PROCESS.

For workers who have been on both sides of the industry, the difference between high-road and low-road companies is not just about pay. It's also about safety for both workers and the public. Although some private waste companies want to do the right thing, and respect their front-line workers, they are often under-bid and undermined by companies willing to cut corners to cut costs. The Commercial Waste Zone policy being adopted by New York City can require that any private hauler bidding to serve customers in a zone meets fair labor standards. When awarding zones to bidders, the City should strongly weigh each company's track record of compliance with:

- local, state and federal minimum wage, living wage, spread of hours, overtime laws, and limitations on hours of service ⁴
- paid sick leave and family leave laws
- local and federal workplace safety laws and adoption of industry best practices and safety training programs



MIKE BERMUDEZ, ANAHEIM, CALIFORNIA

*“I started in 2016 with a non-union waste company. There was constant pressure from my supervisor about completing routes faster, pressure not to take a lunch break, pressure to eat while driving, pressure to speed while driving a truck and to load the trucks overweight. **I was terminated after being outspoken on the job about the need for a union to protect ourselves from a greedy employer.** But I had fallen in love with the trash industry and the work, so I kept in touch with my representative at the Teamsters union and eventually got a better job at Republic Services. The union job has security, a pension, better wages, better health care.*

But the biggest difference between the two jobs is public safety. *I get to work in the morning, and I don’t face pressure from supervisors and co-workers to work too fast, or dangerously. Now I have proper reflective gear, gloves, and everything I need.*

*I go to work happier. I love the job. And after work, I come home stress-free. At my old job I’d start at 6:30 a.m. and not get home until 8:00 at night. Now I start early in the morning and I’m home in time to take my kids to soccer, eat dinner with my family, have a life. My message to waste workers is to not give up and to fight for everything you deserve. **No sanitation worker should be underpaid or put in a dangerous situation because a multimillion-dollar company wants to put more money in its own pocket.**”*

3. USE THE CWZ POLICY TO REWARD COMPANIES THAT IMPLEMENT A RIGOROUS CULTURE OF SAFETY AND FAIRNESS.

Beyond minimum compliance with current employment and safety laws, the CWZ policy should reward companies that adopt and nurture a proactive culture of fairness and safety. For example, the policy should do the following:

- a) Incentivize haulers to create efficient routes that workers can complete in a reasonable shift (including rest breaks) without rushing, speeding, or risking injury.
- b) Ensure that the industry's current workforce benefits from improvements through a worker retention requirement in the Commercial Waste Zone RFP. Companies that are awarded waste zones should commit to hiring and retaining local workers with experience in the industry.
- c) Ensure that workers can "blow the whistle" and report safety and wage violations to local regulators without fear of being identified or retaliated against.
- d) Impose penalties such as fines and the re-bidding of a company's zone if violations are found by workers.
- e) Penalize haulers that violate their employees' right to freely choose to join a union.
- f) Reward companies that invest in workers' health and safety by, for example, switching to low- or zero-emissions truck engines such as compressed natural gas (CNG) or electric⁵, and installing 360-degree cameras to allow drivers and helpers to operate safely in dense urban environments.



4. ASSIGN ONE HAULER TO EACH COMMERCIAL WASTE ZONE (EXCLUSIVE ZONING) TO MAXIMIZE EFFICIENCY AND MAXIMIZE SAFETY.

A typical, inefficient route traveled by a private waste truck in New York City under the current system (Courtesy DSNY)

In the current, disorganized commercial waste collection system in NYC, customers are scattered and routes are long and inefficient. The Department of Sanitation has done extensive modeling for how routes could be reorganized under a zone system — in which one or more haulers are assigned to specific neighborhoods.

They found that the overall miles driven by garbage trucks would be reduced by at least 50% across New York City, and by as much as 79%, for example, in Midtown Manhattan, if there is one (exclusive) hauler per zone.⁶ The hours needed to complete long, grueling routes could be reduced significantly. Workers in Los Angeles and other major cities with similar exclusive zone collection systems know better than anyone how compact, efficient routes enable them to put safety first.



LUIS FREGOSO, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

“My family immigrated from Mexico in the 1970s. My dad and all of my uncles worked in the waste industry in Los Angeles. So I followed in their footsteps.”

*There has been a lot of positive change with the RecycLA waste zone system. The biggest changes I’ve seen are far less truck traffic, better routes, and not having old trucks from the smaller companies. **We used to have multiple trucks from different companies in school zones at 7 AM.** They’d go into the neighborhood for just one bin. We’d be banging trash cans at 4 in the morning, and people would scream at us to shut up. Now it’s just us - one company, and we know how to avoid the school zones when the kids are on the streets. Most of Los Angeles is collected during the day now -- we go in after 6 AM, and there’s a lot less noise in the neighborhood. We’re in and out quick.*

***We also used to drive more than 130 miles per day.** Now it’s down to 60 miles. There’s much less driving between stops, everything is compacted, and you’re working constantly at a good pace. You can also plan your route around community safety and just avoid the danger zones like school zones and traffic.*

*The first job I had in the industry was two years at a large non-union company, and those were the worst years I had. Constant pressure – you had to be running, speeding. Their drivers would be zig-zagging and “snaking,” which is picking up from both sides of the street and crossing into oncoming traffic. The emphasis on safety at Republic is totally different -- we collect all of the stops from one side of the street and then the other. **I have kids who go to school, and I think about that every day when I’m driving my route.**”*

5. PRIORITIZE HIRING AND JOB TRAINING FOR COMMUNITIES THAT ARE OFTEN EXCLUDED FROM GOOD JOBS.

That includes formerly incarcerated individuals, workers who have already put in time at “low-road” companies, recent immigrants, and communities that have borne the brunt of environmental pollution from waste and other industries.



KIARA ALEXIS, OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

“Civcorps is a safe haven that takes underprivileged youth and gives them a second chance in the recycling and waste industry. I started in the recycling program, working as a sorter on a sorting line at a recycling facility. Then I advanced to being a driver’s helper on waste collection trucks. I got my class-B drivers license and my own route collecting food waste from businesses in Oakland, as an apprentice in the Teamsters Union at Waste Management.”

I collect between 190 and 270 stops per shift. I start at 4:30 AM, and I’m done by 1:30 PM. We pick up food scraps and yard clippings and take them to a special, separate building for organic waste. It gets shipped off and turned into soil for organic produce.

This job has changed my life. I just looked over my finances and saw that it would have taken me two years in the past to earn what I did last year. I’m now able to start looking for my own home, which is a big challenge in Oakland. I’m able to save money for the first time in my life, and just do a lot more things.

A lot of the businesses are doing pretty well with separating their food waste, and they’re using their compost bins every day. On the residential side we’re seeing some improvement. People are really starting to get the proper education, since we’re moving toward zero-waste in the next few years, and starting to recycle everything.”

6. SET STANDARDS TO CREATE GOOD, SAFE JOBS AT RECYCLING, COMPOSTING, AND TRANSFER STATION FACILITIES.

The waste zone system needs to include new programs to collect compost and recycle far more of the commercial waste discarded by businesses. Ton for ton, recycling, composting, and de-manufacturing materials in the waste stream create far more jobs than landfilling or incinerating garbage.⁷ At a minimum, the City’s plan is expected to increase recycling and composting by almost 20%, and create hundreds of new jobs in sorting and processing facilities.

Just like driver and helper jobs on waste trucks, these jobs can be dangerous if workers are exploited, or they can be good, “green” jobs if workers have an effective voice. Cities should set standards to ensure that the facilities utilized by waste haulers are safe, modern, and energy-efficient.

JESSICA YANCE, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK



*“I am proud to be on the front lines of improving recycling and protecting New York’s environment. In my five years working at Sims, I have risen through the ranks, moving from quality control specialist to crane operator. **After we organized with the Teamsters, we had a real voice on the job and a seat at the table.** We were able to negotiate improvements to protect ourselves. That’s the most important thing.*”

***We know this is a job that will be there for us and our families in the long-term.** We can plan and have a stable life. A couple months ago, I was able to buy my first home. I never would have been able to do that if I was a non-union worker.*”

As a Teamster, I have also been able to meet other workers in my field and network. My colleagues and I push each other to apply for promotions and challenge ourselves to grow. I was able to bring the skills I learned at Sims to a Teamster relief mission to Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. All this is possible because we fought for a union and better lives for ourselves, and because we had the support of our elected officials, who backed us up when the company resisted our union drive.”

***Some people might think that the workers who sort New Yorkers’ trash don’t deserve good jobs. But this is hard work and important work.** New York will not reach our climate goals if not for the work I and my colleagues are doing at Sims. And with our union, we are showing that this can be a good job, too.”*

7. SUPPORT ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND DIVERSITY IN THE RECYCLING AND DIVERSION SECTOR.

Strong recycling policies can also help small, local businesses to grow and create additional green jobs. Although they may not own truck fleets or large facilities, local specialty recyclers, repair specialists, and small-scale “micro-haulers” who collect food scraps for composting can operate as subcontractors to larger private sanitation companies and help these companies meet the waste diversion goals set under the Commercial Waste Zone policy. Many of these small recycling and reuse firms are MWBEs and bring both diversity and innovation to the commercial waste industry.

In cities such as Los Angeles and Oakland, CA, private sanitation companies are required to provide financial support to community-based sustainability efforts, and to include MWBEs as subcontractors in recycling and waste collection programs in each zone.

FAHAD ALGHAMDI, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

“I work as a repair and resale specialist at Homeboy Electronics Recycling, an organization that repairs and recycles used computers, phones, and other electronics. A lot of times, we can repair and resell items. If we can’t, we send it to our de-manufacturing team, who take the metal, the plastics, and other materials out for sale to vendors. We do everything we can to make sure these things do not end up in landfills.”

Sadly, if we weren’t here most of these electronics would be scrapped, or even worse they would end up in landfills, which is the worst place for electronics to go.”

HOMEBOY
**ELECTRONICS
RECYCLING**



“If people can’t find a place to drop off electronics, they become discouraged.”

*“I left Saudi Arabia and applied for asylum in the US in 2013 after facing religious discrimination at home. As an immigrant, I faced a lot of barriers to employment. I was referred to Homeboy by Chrysalis Enterprises, a wonderful organization that helps workers find training and jobs. **Repair and recycling is a totally new line of work for me.** I learned all of my skills on the job, first by testing computer screens, and eventually growing and transitioning into resale and repair, making room for someone else to start working their way up in my old job.*

The community here is nothing short of wonderful, inclusive, and understanding. This is an environment where you can be glad to come to work every day. The other thing is our cause. With electronics, there is so much wasted opportunity, and so much that can be built out of recycling and reusing the goods we have. It makes me incredibly sad to see people throwing away their old phones, and I’ve even gone out and asked if I can take these phones and repair them.

***Since Los Angeles began addressing the commercial waste problem a few years ago, I’ve seen companies like ours get more organized, more effective, and clear about our priorities.** The staff has grown by 100%, and we’ve been able to accept students from Homeboy Industries [a job training program] directly into internships and jobs in the recycling center.*

I live in Downtown LA, near our site. In my community, I’ve seen that people really want to do the right thing with waste, but there just aren’t enough places where they can do the right thing. If people can’t find a place to drop off electronics, they become discouraged. It’s really important that a place like Homeboy is available and that we make ourselves known to the community.”

ENDNOTES

- 1 “SWANA: 17 industry-related fatalities in North America so far this year,” Cole Rosengren, *Waste Dive* January 23, 2019. Available at <https://www.wastedive.com/news/swana-industry-related-fatalities-north-america-2019/546633/>
- 2 According to Bureau of Labor Statistics data, unionized waste industry workers earn 8% higher weekly wages than non-represented employees nationwide, and are 28% more likely to have access to health benefits.
- 3 See testimony before the New York City Council Committee on Sanitation and Solid Waste Management, January 29, 2019.
- 4 A study by Transform Don’t Trash NYC found that fine particulate matter (PM 2.5) levels in and near the cab of a diesel waste truck were seven times higher than surrounding ambient pollution levels. For drivers and helpers performing physical labor on and near the truck may worsen the health impacts of breathing diesel pollution. See “Clearing the Air,” TDTNYC Coalition, 2016. Available at <http://transformdonttrashnyc.org/resources/clearing-the-air-how-reforming-the-public-waste-sector-can-address-air-quality-issues-in-environmental-justice-communities/>
- 5 New York City Commercial Waste Zone Program, Draft Environmental Impact Statement: https://dsny.cityofnewyork.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/19DOS003Y_DGEIS_reduced.pdf
- 6 See “[Clean City, Green Jobs](#),” Transform Don’t Trash NYC, 2016.
- 7 Scientific studies clearly show that as drivers log more hours on the road for days at a stretch, their performance declines. A 1999 study by the American Automobile Association found that working a 60-hour week, as opposed to a 40-hour or 50-hour week, markedly increases driver’s crash risk, and working more than 60 hours a week increased the odds by 40 percent. See: Kaneko, T., et al., “Multiday Driving Patterns and Motor Carrier Accident Risk: A Disaggregate Analysis,” *Accident Analysis and Prevention*, 25:5, 1992, 437-456. The US DOT has also found that 45 percent of serious crashes occur when truck drivers are traveling too fast for weather conditions, driving while fatigued, or directly reporting that they feel they’re under work-related pressure. See: *Large Truck Crash Causation Study* database, July 2005, in U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, “Report to Congress on the Large Truck Crash Causation Study,” March 2006.

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