

AIRPORT CONTRACT WORKERS PROTEST FOR UNION, HIGHER WAGES

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Sept. 02--Chanting and holding up signs in the sweltering midday heat, contract employees from Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport brought their fight for the right to unionize and earn higher wages to downtown Fort Lauderdale.

The gathering of more than 50 employees of airline contractors G2 Secure Staff and Eulen America rallied with supporters outside the Broward County Government Center on Tuesday.

The Service Employees International Union, which is helping to organize the airport contract workers, accuse G2 and Eulen of thwarting their employees' efforts to unionize to improve their wages and working conditions.

Officials of G2 and Eulen, contractors for Spirit, Southwest, American, JetBlue and other airlines, could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

"We have been fighting for two years and employers have been fighting back. Today we're taking a stand. Enough is enough," said Newton Ingram, a skycap for G2 who works two jobs to support

his family.

The union says more than 1,200 employees -- including wheelchair attendants, baggage handlers and cabin cleaners -- earn an average of \$8.14 an hour and have no meaningful benefits. As contract workers, they are excluded from Broward County's Living Wage Ordinance that guarantees county employees at least \$13.20 an hour.

As a result, nearly a third who work at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood rely on some form of government assistance such as food stamps or housing assistance, the union said.

G2 and Eulen contract employees at Miami International Airport, by contrast, earn as much as \$14.27 per hour because they're covered by the Miami-Dade County living wage law.

"We should be able to benefit from the success that we contribute to," said Ingram, a participant in Tuesday's rally. "At the very least, we should be able to fight for better working conditions, without fear and intimidation."

Supporters at Tuesday's rally spoke up for the workers' demands.

"Workers at this airport deserve an increase in their wages and they deserve a living wage," said U.S. Rep. Alcee Hastings. "We must ensure that companies respect their workers' right to organize for better wages and benefits."

Hastings, who turns 79 on Saturday, said 60 years ago he earned more than the airport contract employees working as a dishwasher and short order cook at a Jewish delicatessen near Atlantic City, NJ.

"That does not make sense," he told the workers. "I am so proud that you all are taking it to the streets."

The Broward County Commission in May introduced a bill to extend the Living Wage Ordinance to include airport contract workers and commissioned a study on the issue. The study has not been completed.

"It's been too long. We have to push this issue," Commissioner Dale Holness told the airport workers during a brief speech while on a break from a commission meeting. "It's the fair thing to do."

Earlier Tuesday, the airport workers also went on a 24-hour strike at the airport.

In June, a group of about 50 wheelchair attendants employed by G2 also went on a one-day strike to protest their "poverty wages" and other labor-related concerns.

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