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SEIU launches campaign to unionize thousands of workers at Newark, 2 NYC airports

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Jerry McCrea/The Star-Ledger

Dozens Newark Liberty International Airport workers rally on the steps of Newark City Hall asking airlines and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to improve their pay and working conditions/

NEWARK — One way airlines have cut costs in the post-9/11 era has been to lay off baggage handlers, cabin cleaners, SkyCaps and other service employees, then contract for those services with companies that pay lower wages and offer fewer benefits.

In an effort to boost compensation for ground support workers, while at the same time expand their own membership, Local 32BJ of the Service Employees International Union is launching a campaign to unionize thousands of workers at Newark Liberty International, John F. Kennedy International and

LaGuardia airports.

To launch the bi-state campaign, representatives of Local 32BJ joined about 50 service workers from Newark Liberty for a rally this morning in front of Newark City Hall. They held signs reading, "Newark needs good jobs."

"We need good jobs now!" said Kevin Brown, New Jersey state director for Local 32BJ, who led the crowd in a rousing call and response. "What do we need?" said Brown.

The crowd responded, "Good jobs."

After Brown yelled, "When do we need them?" the crowd yelled, "Now."

Earlier Brown's group issued a statement blasting the low pay of service workers at the airport.

"These airport workers perform some of the most important duties to make our airports welcoming and hospitable," Brown said in a statement. "A recent survey of 100 contracted service workers at Newark shows that two out of three workers earn \$8.00 or less per hour — or as little as \$16,640 a year. Many of these workers reported that they get no paid sick days and that they have no employer-provided health insurance."

The local said there are about 4,000 service workers at Newark Liberty, with another 11,000 or so at Kennedy and LaGuardia. The union is also calling on airlines and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which runs the airports, to encourage contractors to pay better wages.

The service workers' union campaign follows a successful nationwide effort by the American Federation of Government Employees to unionize 40,000 employees of the Transportation Security Administration, including about 1,000 screeners at Newark Liberty.

The Air Transport Association, which represents the industry's largest carriers, declined to comment on the service workers' campaign. The Port Authority did not respond to requests for comment.

Jerrold Glass, a Washington-based airline consultant and former US Airways human resources executive, rejected an assertion by the SEIU that the airlines were in a "race to the bottom." Rather, Glass said, the industry has been trying to bring the pay for ground support workers in line with prevailing wages for comparable jobs. Many airlines have retained ground support employees, Glass said, while some ground support contractors are unionized.

Glass said layoffs and the use of contractors by airlines are responses to the same sagging economic conditions that have hurt other sectors of the economy. The airline industry, in particular, has also been hurt by skyrocketing fuel prices and post-9/11 declines in air travel, he said.

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