

In these two excerpts from an April 10, 2009 interview by Kerry Taylor, Charleston native Richard Polite, 58, discusses his work as a driver for the City's environmental services department. He enjoys the job he has now held for 12 years as it affords him the opportunity to serve and interact with the public. Nevertheless, hazardous conditions and mismanagement have led Polite and many of his coworkers to establish a union this past year:

Clip 1 (sanitation work)

Taylor: What do you like most about the actual work?

Polite: What I like about sanitation is when you're out in the public, you know it's not a desk job.

Taylor: Right.

Polite: Okay and when you're out in the street and you're out in the public you know everybody's watching you, people are paying attention to what you're doing. You try to act professional. And we try to get the job done easy, swift, and let the people know, "Hey this is the City of Charleston Sanitation Department, we're the best they got." And they are visible, the residents, some of the elderly people we know can't bring the can out, we go and get it for them. They appreciate that. They're what, eighty, ninety years old and the can weighs what, say one hundred and twenty pounds. That old lady can't bring that can out there. But they know if I pull up with my crew, and we see the elderly, they're going to get that can, dump it and bring it back. And the people will appreciate that kind of service.

We're here to serve the public. The public is the people we see every day, and working in sanitation you get a chance to meet people, they talk to you. I went to, what's that, Church St., this man I've known him for maybe about a year. Okay, he brings us sodas; when it's hot he brings us water. And sometimes we have to spend about three or four minutes just talking to him because he's the only one in the house. And when we come there we know we got to stop there, we all have to get out of the truck, and come to him and talk to him, and let him know, "Hey how are you doing today?" "Ya'll ok?" And it becomes a friendship. And when you change drivers, from one route to another, these residents get concerned: "Where's my driver? I haven't seen him." I've been out for a short period of time for my knee surgery, and it was during the Christmas period that I was out. So a couple of residents didn't see me. Now gratuity is against the rules and regulations. That means you're don't supposed to give no public servants any kind of gratuity. But when these people see you, they'd be so glad to see you again: "Where you been at?" They'd stop me. "Where you been at?" I said, "I've been hurt." "How come you didn't tell me? I've been seeing this other driver, he's not my driver, he just dropped the can and go." I said, "Well that's not me, I'm here to serve the public." But once you get to know the residents like that they get to know you. And I like being out there, being around them.

When we leave that yard, we're at peace. We're out there doing the job working for the public. We at peace. We know the public, we know what they expect of us and we give them that. But when we come back to the yard it's a headache. In the yard and coming back to the yard is the most difficult time of our work day. But in the public, we're at ease, because we know we're around the people who we're serving, and they enjoy the fact that we care about how their residence is looking and taking care of

them. So I like being out there with them. So going to work to me, the hardest thing of my day is in the morning getting in my vehicle and listening to that mind control session for the half hour and coming back in. But when I'm in the public I enjoy being out there.

Clip 2 (unionization)

My theory of the union: It's not to pressure the City, or nothing about money. It's the way they treat their employees. If you're a public servant you deserve dignity, respect, and acknowledgment that you're doing a service for the community. We're overworked, underpaid, and disrespected. The people who are in charge of sanitation got to realize that they're dealing with human beings—female as well as male. And they mistreat everybody on the same level. They don't care if you're male or female. They mistreat everybody the same way. Unless we get a grip on how they treat the sanitation employee it's going to be continuously mistreated and nobody don't care. Because it seems like to us being a sanitation worker you're expendable. If you get hurt or you get injured they get rid of you and get somebody else. They don't want you to retire no way from there because that means they have to pay you out of their budget. So the quicker that you work a couple of years if you get hurt or injured they can get rid of you and get somebody else who is fresh, young, and new and mistreat them until they get rid of them. That's not how a job is supposed to be in the 21st century. You are supposed to have longevity, protection, and care. I mean if you're employed with somebody you come there to do a task for a fee. But these people here were will kill you and pay you nothing. And that's not how in the 21st century American employees should be treated.