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Statement on Workers Memorial Day 2021

from Jason Rabinowitz, Director, Public Services Division

The pandemic has challenged workers throughout North America. For our 200,000 Teamster Public Services Division members, it has meant hard work and sacrifice. Many of us have been putting our lives on the line performing essential services to keep our nation running. For some of us, the past year has meant the loss of someone we know — family a friends, neighbors and co-workers. That’s why this year’s Workers Memorial Day is particularly poignant, as we honor those who have passed away and been injured while serving on the front lines of this unprecedented national health crisis.

Every year on April 28, in keeping with Teamster tradition, the Public Services Division recognizes Workers’ Memorial Day, and pays tribute to all our members who have become ill, injured or made the ultimate sacrifice on the job.

This year, we also recognize our members who have been negatively affected by the pandemic. To all Teamster Public Services workers, I want to thank you for the contributions you made to the community and the common good of our nation in the face of great adversity.

With the arrival of the COVID-19 virus, all public-sector workers faced an immediate challenge of how to continue working without risking the health of themselves or their families. The wide range of essential jobs that members performed — maintaining utilities to protecting communities, keeping core functions of government and public school systems running, and more — could not be ignored despite the challenges caused by the spread of COVID-19.

Though some continued their work remotely, other jobs demanded that our members were serving on the front lines. Public servants anguished over how to best protect themselves from a virus that was still mysterious to top medical experts and institutions. Our Public Services Division worked with members and locals to fight for for critical safety protections on the job, including personal protective equipment (PPE), adjustments in work schedules, more flexible leave policies and fairer compensation for the risks they were undertaking every day.

At the same time, the economic downturn caused unprecedented fiscal shortfalls in state and local budgets. Because financial help from the federal government was extremely limited until recently, it was our Public Services members and locals who led the fight to protect public services and programs from being cut. Thanks to the political power of Teamsters in the public sector, we were able to prevent public-sector jobs funded and keep our members working. These

fight, and the resulting victories, preserved many members' jobs, pay and benefits at a time when they were in deep danger.

Though public services workers everywhere were required to fight to protect their livelihoods and their safety, political and departmental management often insisted that Teamsters expose themselves to unsafe working conditions. At the onset of the pandemic, many members were forced to endure working without proper sanitation and PPE, extended worktimes due to ill-conceived furloughs and layoffs, and inadequate contact tracing and other policy initiatives designed to detect and isolate infected individuals before they became a threat to their co-workers. Though there was some exposure and infection which was unavoidable, in many cases, the negligence of management was felt by those who became ill, impacting their families as well as the communities in which they bravely serve. The workers who became ill or died as a result of such irresponsible decision-making represents a painful testament to misguided priorities.

Regardless of how someone passed during this time, the loss is felt by those around them, including family, friends, workplaces and communities. The COVID-19 virus has taken indiscriminately; members died because they simply went to work to provide for their families. Still, I hope that it will be of comfort to those who are feeling this loss to remember people as they lived; as devoted spouses, parents, friends and as public servants. Their lives and careers in public service should be an inspiration to us all as we seek to provide create and nurture a better world.

As we continue down the path toward recovery, I hope that we all will renew our commitment to public service and to protect the safety and livelihood of all public service workers. We have worn masks, isolated from family and friends and disrupted our routines to protect each other from the COVID-19 virus. We have willingly missed much in the past fifteen months in order to protect each other and minimize the spread of this destructive virus. I hope we continue in that spirit and support one another in the coming year. Together, we will recover and rebuild. The Teamsters Public Services Division is committed to helping all public service workers and their families as they seek to move past the pandemic and continue the fight for a safer, better future.