

The Job of a UB Janitor Michael Raleigh

I conducted the following interview with a janitor at the University of Buffalo named Jon. Jon is a white man in his early 40's. He works on south campus in some of the medical buildings.

What are your job duties, what do you do?

It varies. You can do carpet shampoo, floor work, taking care of trash, recycling, clean up spills of blood or chemicals, snow removal. It depends on the building. I work in some of the medical buildings where there are different labs and experiments. Other people who work in residence halls do not deal with these different conditions.

Tell me about the conditions at work; it sounds like some of them are dangerous.

Yeah, you bet it can be dangerous. Some of the areas where people work have nuclear materials. There is a nuclear reactor that people work in. The people who work in nuclear areas require special training about safety. Animal testing labs can be dangerous. In the labs with mice, you have to be aware of what you are dealing with.



Are the people who work in more dangerous environments paid more than those in safer environments?

That would be a nice thought. No we're not paid more.

How much autonomy do you have at work? Do you have to perform tasks the exact way that a supervisor demands or are you able to do things your own way?

That depends. With safety issues you have less freedom to do things your own way. Other times it is about working with the customer to get things done. Some customers like things done a certain way.

Who are the customers, the building occupants?

Right, we refer to them as customers and it is all about doing the job to their satisfaction.

What are the good things about your job?

Working for the state you generally get good benefits. At the school you work with intelligent people, so you are usually treated well.



You have worked at other places where that is not the case?

I work here and I have a side business where I do the same thing in other places. My wife works at the school too doing the same thing. Really I work here to get benefits. Healthcare is almost free. I think I pay 60 dollars a month with 5 dollar co-pays.

Would you make enough money if only one of you worked?

That's a big no. It wouldn't be enough.

How many hours a week do you work between your job at UB and your side business?

About 50 to 60. I don't work overtime at UB. I only work 40 hours here.

So you are a member of a union?

Yes, CSEA (Civil Service Employees Association). As of May 15th this year there will be no non-union cleaning staff at UB.

When did this transition begin?

It started in 2007. They have been phasing out buildings since then.

Are you aware of the student movement that helped unionize more of the workers on campus?

Everyone here is very aware of that.



What was it like before the shift towards more union employees?

There were non-union people working here making minimum wage so you were lucky to get anything back then.

Does everyone in the union make the same amount of money?

Well everyone at the same classification level makes the same amount of money so you could be a 5,6 or a 7. They cap it at 7 which is about 35 or 40.

Dollars an hour?

No, (laughs) thousand dollars per year. Per hour, I think the max is about

14 or 15 dollars. But really, I work here for the healthcare benefits. Trying to get health insurance out there, it was killing me. Here I have full medical, dental, and eye care.

And that covers your whole family?

Yes.

How do you feel about your employers?

You mean Sodexho? A

lot of people don't realize this but the cleaning staff is managed by Sodexho. They are a very large business. Sodexho is also trying to take over some of the food service workers on campus. UB agreed to pay the union workers, but they did not want to pay for union managers. Now the situation is that the cleaning staff are state workers, but the managers are paid by Sodexho in a separate contract. So I come to work and a manager from Sodexho tells me what to do.



So how do you feel about the Sodexho managers?

I would prefer to work for state people but it is not as important as all of the benefits I receive as a state worker. If that is what it took to get a better deal from the state then so be it. Unfortunately though, with the agreement to have private managers, they won't let us become managers. So if you want to go apply yourself and go to school to become a manager, you will have to go so somewhere else.

We also receive benefits other than healthcare. You start out with initial time-off benefits of three weeks vacation time, five personal days, five sick days, and thirteen holidays. That is just to start. We also get a retirement benefit. The retirement benefit means that you can retire after 20 years and receive 40% of your salary. And we only have to pay in for the first seven years.

Additional Facts About Janitors

The average yearly income of janitors in Western New York is \$24,070, which is less than the statewide average of \$28,180.ⁱ Experienced janitors make less in WNY than those statewide with the two averages being \$27,320 and \$33,130.ⁱⁱ Jon estimated that top paid UB janitors make well above other janitors working in WNY and enjoy excellent benefits as well.

Several years ago UB Students Against Sweatshops lead a successful campaign to unionize all of the janitorial staff in an effort to improve wages and benefits. As reflected in the interview, janitors at UB are well compensated and receive family-supporting benefits. Despite this success

and unfortunately for Jon, it sounds like it can still be difficult to support a family working as a janitor at UB.

Campaigns to improve wages, benefits and working conditions for janitors exist in other parts of the United States and in a variety of work environments. The “Justice for Janitors” campaign, organized by the Service Employees International Union, has been waged in many big cities and college campuses since 1985.ⁱⁱⁱ The SEIU won a recent victory with Minneapolis janitors by threatening a region-wide strike. The victory for janitors included better health insurance benefit levels, the right to eight hour, full-time jobs by 2012, job security when buildings choose to switch cleaning companies, support for the use of environmentally friendly cleaning products, and transitions to day shift cleaning.^{iv}

ⁱ Occupational Wages in the Western New York Region. www.labor.state.ny.us

ⁱⁱ Id.

ⁱⁱⁱ Justice for Janitors. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justice_for_Janitors

^{iv} Victory in the Twin Cities. www.SEIU.org/2010/03/when-the-twin-cities-show.php