

A Convoy of Bravery on 9/11

Teamsters Local 237 Men & Women in NYCHA Trucks

by William Russo



I'm William 'Bill' Russo and served at the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) from July 1976 to December of 2019.

In this message, I wish to bring focus on a brave group of public servants, Teamsters Local 237 union members for whom I organized in a convoy of trucks on September 11, 2001. A convoy is defined as a group of people traveling together with a purpose and mutual support. I recognize the massive effort by countless numbers of people in response to the terrorist attacks on 9/11. I want to provide a summary of this convoy.

The Focus on NYCHA Truck Drivers

Looking back, I recall the bravery of the men and women of the Teamsters union, Local 237. This year 2026, is the 25th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001 at the World Trade Center. Members of Local 237 in many titles were a significant part of the overall NYCHA response.

I will speak here about all NYCHA solo truck drivers and those truck drivers who brought along a fellow Local 237 member in the truck with them. I'll give a few examples.

My Role

On the day of the terrorists attacks on our nation, I was the NYCHA public housing Borough Director of the Manhattan Property Management Department. I was a Managerial employee at the time. Earlier in my career I had been a Teamsters Union Local 237 Chapter member as a Housing Assistant, Assistant Property Manager and Property Manager.

On the morning of September 11th 2001 and through the night and in the coming days a convoy of brave NYCHA truck drivers were dispatched to Ground Zero. Here's why:

NYCHA with housing developments in all five Boroughs was unique under the circumstances. NYCHA had property management resources, vehicles, equipment, supplies and people, men and women.

That morning, after the attacks nationwide emergency measures and restrictions went into effect. Transportation came to a virtual halt in Manhattan, the country was on high alert. Were we going to be attacked again? Quickly rescue and recovery went into immediate actions. It was for all concerned, "all hands on deck." In NYC Ground Zero as it became known was a disaster area, unspeakable conditions.

NYC Government ordered all bridges and tunnels closed. However NYCHA vehicles and equipment were exempt. In fact, NYCHA vehicles were allowed to go through that were trucks, vans, and generators in tow. The closures lasted for three days except for the eastbound Holland Tunnel which was closed until October 15, 2001. Enter the NYCHA convoy of trucks driven by Local 237 union members.

Every responder from any organization, whether or not affiliated with any group faced a difficult situation. I now highlight here for Local 237 members their role on 9/11 and the days after.

A Motivated NYCHA Borough Staff

We developed a plan of action for our Borough and project employees in close communications with our executive staff at NYCHA

headquarters. We let our developments know via phone, radio and in person to all NYCHA developments to send needed resources, equipment, vehicles and available staff to Ground Zero as appropriate.

The Call to Serve

On 9/11, and for days and days thereafter, as needed, NYCHA dump trucks played a pivotal role in clearing the streets and sidewalks. It was a necessary, somber and difficult assignment. The truck drivers knew that. It was a 'call to arms.' It had to be done.

Setting Up an Arrival Location for Trucks

Trucks were especially in demand. We had to make sure trucks from the outer Boroughs would not get lost, disoriented or jammed up. So we set up a location for those NYCHA trucks that came roaring from the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn and Staten Island that bypassed any restrictions on bridges and tunnels from the outer Boroughs.

Thus, on 9/11 all available NYCHA dump trucks including Manhattan NYCHA dump trucks were ordered to report to a staging at the Lillian Wald Houses. Once logged in, the drivers were informed about the mission and directed to drive to a makeshift command post at 6th Avenue and East Houston street. We lined up the NYCHA trucks perpendicular to the center median of Houston Street. Quickly the trucks were sent as needed to Ground Zero. There were one hundred twenty trucks.

Command Post for Truck Dispatch

At that post (later moved to Franklin Street) limited Manhattan Management staff were present directing operations. I set up there and occasionally walked to Ground Zero. We were joined by NYCHA staff, other city agencies, and utility companies that offered supplies such as flashlights, paper masks and other gear.

Sending Trucks to Ground Zero

Talk about bravery! There was no time to lose. As soon as our trucks arrived The NYC Office of Emergency Management (OEM) contacted our team at the Houston Street muster area. OEM informed we had amassed numerous dump trucks all along Houston Street for blocks and blocks - an impressive mobilization quickly began relaying requests for NYCHA dump trucks one, two, three or more at a time. No small talk.

As the trucks went in motion I pointed the way to the truck drivers. "Make a right turn south down Broadway." That's it, through the dusty debris they went and made their way to Ground Zero to take on tragic cargo.

Walking the Line of Trucks

I remember that as I walked by the phalanx of trucks I saw the determination and sometimes saw moments of fear of men and women in NYCHA dump trucks. I knew some of them personally. The trucks came from every borough from any development that had an available dump truck and driver.

What Would They Face?

So off they went into the unknown carnage. What would they be facing? They would learn that they had to drive through horrible conditions. They drove through the streets of Ground Zero and everywhere in sight (if they could see at all) amid a massive mix of crushed concrete, steel beams, broken glass, ash, dust, and hazardous particles and much worse. In the debris, in the streets and sidewalks and all the waste material, there were pieces of bones, teeth, hair and other body parts mixed with the rubble. There were bodies taken separately by emergency vehicles to the morgue.

Perseverance Prevails

I've spoken to many drivers. For them it was as if the human senses were under attack and the strength of purpose was the recourse. The smells were awful. The visuals gross and stark: lots of shoes, scattered footwear all about. The silence was eerie, it was the silence of disappointment and horror, of the helplessness of not being to help anyone.

And so it was that when NYCHA trucks arrived, the NYC Department of Sanitation (DSNY) was on the scene set up with personnel, motorized equipment, and their own drivers and operators. DSNY had the appropriate 'Front End' loaders hydraulic motorized heavy loading equipment to scoop, lift and dump debris into our NYCHA dump trucks.

The purpose of the use of NYCHA trucks on 9/11 and many days thereafter was to make way for the heavy equipment, cranes and the like.

Bring it On

The sights, sounds and smells were awful. Public Service ignored that, sensed it and carried on. Dust, pulverized from who knows what origins swirled in the air at times. Our truck drivers took on loads of debris, they were exposed to the dust and toxins.

Respect

Extra care had to be used sometimes to hand sort and load debris even bag body parts for transport. All the debris had to be preserved safely. I cannot imagine the feeling of driving being in a NYCHA knowing what it was carrying.

Time to go, load was filled. DSNY had loaded onto the NYCHA trucks and then our drivers delivered their sacred debris to a designated DSNY site. They were instructed at Ground Zero to drive their trucks to the DSNY Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island or to a DSNY barge transfer station off of Hamilton Avenue in Brooklyn for later barge transfer to Fresh Kills.

Some of our trucks made multiple trips to Ground Zero and back! It was an incredible effort often by employees going out of their way to do more and more.

The First NYCHA Truck

Everyone was and is da hero in this NYCHA convoy effort. I wish at this juncture to bring attention to **Richard Ortiz**, the first NYCHA truck driver to be sent directly to Ground Zero. I saw him early on 9/11 and waved him on as the first truck to leave from Houston Street. I signed a Victims Compensation witness statement for him.

He told me that when he got to West Street traveling north from the FDR underpass tunnel he could barely see through the windshield of his truck. The dust was so gray he said it seemed like nighttime on

an otherwise clear day. Our drivers still faced the dust in the air hours and days after the 9/11 explosions and multiple buildings collapses. Richard was the lead driver and coincidentally he was a former United States Marine.

Brave Women Truck Drivers

Among the drivers and NYCHA responders there were brave women. Here are some words from **Cheryl Bobb** and **Sylvia Carattini**, NYCHA truck drivers that appeared in the NYCHA Bulletin:

"At around 7pm, when the first 150 trucks were sent in to ground zero, I was the third to go. It took about 40 minutes to drive the last five blocks.

We waited inside the truck as Sanitation Workers used a front end loader to pile big pieces of metal and other debris onto the truck. Air filled my nose with black ashes. It took about one-half hour, then we headed to the dumping site about an hour and one-half away.

We finished dumping around 2am and drive back to Hudson Street to park the truck so another team could drive back in. I arrived at La Guardia Houses at 3:30am, took a shower, and fell asleep on a bench in the locker room. At 8am, I clocked in and worked my whole shift. I'm glad I volunteered because I never had a chance to help like that before."— **Sylvia Carattini**, Caretaker, La Guardia Houses

"I was a groundsman, not a driver, but I can drive a dump truck. So, when my supervisor said that drivers were needed, I wanted to go.

It was 9pm when we headed downtown. At that point, we were a group of three dump trucks filled with about 50 employees.

We had to wait on a line about six blocks long with about 50 trucks ahead of us. When we got in, NYCHA volunteers in white protective suits filled the back with debris. We made about five trips with debris to a sanitation site in Brooklyn."— **Cheryl Bobb**, Caretaker G, Morris Houses

Are You a 9/11 Responder?

Be aware that anyone who went to Ground Zero as a responder or were in the defined exposure zone for the period of time required by law is entitled to healthcare and possibly compensation through the 9/11 WTC Health Program as First Responders, Responders or as individuals who were in the Exposure Zone as required by law.

NYCHA employees who were asked to help out or went directly to help out, and many did, in the recovery effort, may qualify as 'Responders.' Local 237 Truck drivers in those circumstances are thus 'Responders.' NYCHA had hundreds of 9/11 Responders in various positions and titles, union and non-union.

The 9/11 Victims Compensation Fund

Some employees have applied for compensation and received funds from the VCF for 9/11 related illnesses. A family member can also qualify to receive compensation on behalf of deceased qualified VCF person. For information about the Victims Compensation Fund go to: www.vcf.gov

Conclusion

I have shared with you my experiences about the role of New York City Housing Authority truck drivers with a deep sense of respect, gratitude and solidarity for them.

Let us remember, never forget, and carry on!