During the day, Manhattan Beach Boulevard overflows with traffic, but the only thing whipping down the street at 10 p.m. is a cold night wind. To the north, the lights of approaching jets trace the landing path to LAX in the night sky.

Darlene Esquivel pulls into a staff parking lot alongside the facilities management building at El Camino College. Esquivel is one of about 30 custodians on the graveyard shift who put the Torrance campus back in shape nightly while more than 22,000 students sleep.

During the past decade has worsened when districts build new facilities but fail to increase maintenance budgets. El Camino, for example, has construction plans through 2025. Custodians are assigned “runs,” a regular set of rooms or floors in a building or facility, similar to workloads assigned to hotel staff. A typical floor might include from 10 to 17 classrooms and four to six bathrooms. Esquivel’s run, for example, includes a dean’s office, lounges, photo labs, and other spots.

Union organizers held a training session at which the night crew identified short staffing as the most pressing issue and drafted a petition calling on the district to collaborate on workload.

“Short staffing has been an ongoing problem for years,” Flores said. “We feel the pressure to do more and more, to the point that we feel bullied.”

Custodians presented the petition to the district in December. Except for two probationary employees, all had signed it. In January, El Camino supervisors, the facilities director, and human resources director set a precedent and met with the full night crew.

“The district accepts that they’re short-staffed, but claims they can’t hire right now,” Smith said.

Short staffing caused by budget cuts during the past decade has worsened when districts build new facilities but fail to increase maintenance budgets. El Camino, for example, has construction plans through 2025.

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There are nearly 50 runs on campus and only 30 custodians to do them. When vacations and sick coworkers are taken into account, staff are almost always expected to work two or more runs per shift. They can be written up for insubordination if they don’t do their regular run and any extra assignments.

“Management claims they are demanding more from custodians because they have higher expectations for cleanliness in the new buildings,” Smith said.

The district may have higher expectations, but Smith said they aren’t based on having deployed more custodians or more advanced equipment. According to the custodians, it’s simply a case of not having enough people to do the work.

Organize, build power, defend public education

Paula Phillips Council President

Hiding behind his false promise to “Make America Great Again,” President Trump brings the threat of privatizing public education and denigrates the values that unite our country. As unionists, we have two essential jobs.

Our job inside the union is to organize and educate members and work to improve our professional lives. In the months ahead, our priorities must be to educate our colleagues about the importance of unions, strengthen our power at bargaining tables across the state, and shape public policy. We must share and apply the best practices of organizing classified employees to create a shield against anti-labor forces.

Our job outside the union is to stay connected with the larger world and unite with those who share our values in order to defend unions and public education. And we must harness our diversity — because we are all in this fight together.
to the levels of cleanliness developed by the Association of Physical Plant Administrators, El Camino can expect an environment that ranks as “moderate dinginess,” the fourth of five levels. (See The five levels of clean)

The district argues that the custodians’ runs don’t need to be recalculated because new buildings replaced old ones without adding square footage. Which might be true if it wasn’t for the major new stadium on campus.

“Game days mean long nights for custodians,” Cunnigan said.

Short staffing isn’t the only problem on night shift. Encampments are common in the adjacent public park, leading to security concerns. When homeless come on campus, college police are supposed to handle encounters with students, faculty and staff. Protocols aren’t followed as closely, however, at 3:30 in the morning.

The five levels of clean

A national study of college students found a correlation between the cleanliness of a school’s facilities and academic achievement. Cleanliness and Learning in Higher Education ranks clean environments fourth after noise, air temperature, and lighting.

Conducted by the Association of Physical Plant Administrators, the study was based on the group’s five levels of clean identified in its Custodial Staffing Guidelines for Educational Facilities. The rating system takes into account square footage to be cleaned, number of custodians, and efficiency of the equipment they will use. Using that formula, El Camino can expect the fourth level of cleanliness, Moderate Dinginess. Here is the entire yardstick:

- **Level 1** – Orderly Spotlessness
- **Level 2** – Ordinary Tidiness
- **Level 3** – Casual Inattention
- **Level 4** – Moderate Dinginess
- **Level 5** – Unkempt Neglect

>Learn how each level is defined in detail at goo.gl/SVSeuy.

Esquivel said the district expects custodians to clean buildings even when timers have turned off the lights for the night. “We go into restrooms and don’t know if we’re in there alone,” she said. “It’s dangerous. I have three kids and I want to go home after work.”

— By Steve Weingarten, CFT Reporter