

Union officials stump for Democrats while blocking support for Los Angeles janitors strike

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The three-week strike by 8,500 Los Angeles janitors is being used as a photo backdrop for leading Democratic politicians, including Vice President Al Gore, while behind the scenes union officials are offering concessions to end the walkout that fall far short of the workers' demands.

At the same time, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) called off a strike by 5,500 Chicago janitors, after just 24 hours, in an effort to dissipate the growing support for common action by tens of thousands of low-paid maintenance workers throughout the US whose contracts are expiring.

The LA janitors, who earn between \$6.80 and \$7.80 an hour, are demanding a \$3 per hour raise, plus improved benefits, over three years. An association of 18 maintenance contractors have offered 80 cents to \$1.30 an hour raises over three years. The union has indicated its willingness to lower its demands, but contractors have stood firm, saying that building owners would switch to nonunion contractors paying the minimum wage of \$5.75 per hour without benefits, if confronted with higher rates. The contractors have hired strikebreakers to clean office buildings under the protection of the Los Angeles police .

Talks collapsed on April 14 following a series of phone calls between Geoffrey Ely, president of the Building Owners and Managers Association, Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan, landlord Rob Maguire, and Mike Garcia, president of SEIU Local 1877, which represents the strikers. The contractors were undeterred and reiterated that they had made their final offer.

Negotiations resumed Tuesday. But, despite Garcia's expressions of optimism, they ended without any new

wage offer from the contractors. LA County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, who has spoken with several prominent building owners to broker a deal, said, "The union has been willing to try anything, to come up with some creative solutions. But with the owners, there's a disconnect between what they're saying and getting any action. I'm beginning to get the sense that the owners just want to rub their noses in it."

Meanwhile, police violence continues, with one woman striker hospitalized Tuesday for injuries suffered when she was struck by a billy club while picketing a contractor's office. The LAPD has carried out scores of arrests since the strike began.

The janitors have tremendous public support. The *Los Angeles Times* noted that at a recent demonstration along Wilshire Boulevard working and middle class people leaned out of their apartment windows to cheer the protesters as they marched by. Barbara Liner of West Los Angeles told the newspaper, "These people deserve a living wage. It's so expensive living in LA." Santa Monica attorney Christine Arden stood on the balcony of her condominium, clapping, and said, "I'm for them. I think it's great."

The strike has touched a powerful chord among working people because, despite all the talk of America's economic boom, tens of millions of workers are barely making ends meet. The janitors, most of whom are Mexican and Central American immigrants, clean the offices of some of the biggest corporations in the US. A recent article in the *New York Times* noted that janitors in the Silicon Valley city of San Jose, California were forced to live in garages with their families, and were still paying \$750 rent out of their \$954 a month salaries.

The union officials, however, have work diligently to prevent the LA strike from sparking a wider protest movement amongst low-paid workers. Instead they have provided various Democratic politicians with a platform to posture as friends of workers, although they have presided over cuts in welfare and the vast growth in social inequality.

On April 16 Vice President Al Gore gave a three-minute speech to 1,500 strikers in Santa Monica. Then this Tuesday afternoon, Senator Edward Kennedy, in California to raise funds for his Massachusetts reelection campaign, also posed for pictures with strikers. That evening, Democratic National Committee Chairman Joe Andrew and Democratic National Convention Chief Executive Lydia Camarillo joined janitors at a later rally “to show support for working families.”

The AFL-CIO, which has already pledged not to conduct any strikes in Philadelphia during the Republican convention. is reportedly preparing to make the same deal with the Democrats, who are holding their convention in Los Angeles.

Several hundred janitors are currently on strike in San Diego and in suburban Chicago, and contracts covering nearly 100,000 SEIU maintenance workers are due to expire in New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Detroit and other cities. Union officials are bargaining separately for each section of maintenance workers, thereby allowing the contractors to keep workers divided and retain widely disparate wage and benefit scales.

The SEIU reached a tentative agreement covering janitors in downtown Chicago, for example, while leaving suburban workers—who make \$6.65 an hour with no health insurance or pensions—to fight alone.

On April 12 thousands of members from SEIU Local 32 B-32J in New York City held the largest demonstration of building workers ever. The New York contract, covering 33,000 janitors, doormen, elevator operators and other maintenance workers, expires on April 21. At a rally of 9,000 building workers in Madison Square Garden three weeks ago, workers authorized union leaders to call a strike.

The union last went on strike in 1991 for 12 days. In 1999, 32 B-32J President Gus Bevona was forced to retire and the local was placed under trusteeship by the SEIU national leadership after revelations of

widespread corruption, including Bevona's annual salary of \$412,000—approximately 20 times the pay received by those he claimed to represent.

The tone of the demonstrators was militant. One worker with 15 years seniority told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "The industry had a 100 percent raise since they destabilized rent in New York. We got screwed last time with Bevona negotiating. They were paid off. We were kept in the dark. Our rally shows there is strength in numbers. There will be bloodshed if they try taking in anybody across our picket lines."

"There is one issue," another worker with 27 years said. "I got to speak at the Garden rally and said no building must be allowed to sign up individually. In the last strike, it was demoralizing to see the building across the street working while we were still on strike. And they need to eliminate the 80 percent [the two-tier wage level established for new employees in the previous contract]."

"The older guys," he continued, "need good pensions. We should be able to go out at 62. Most of us will do 45 years, not 25 years. Job security is a priority. Last contract we should have gone out. The attitude of members was 'as long as it's not us.' Near me 25 workers were just put out, replaced by nonunion people."

The last contract negotiated under Gus Bevona was for an 8 percent wage increase over three years. Local 32 B-J demands include 10 percent annual increases over three years and an increase in the maximum pension to \$1,500, which now has an upper limit of \$1,000 a month for workers with 25 years' experience who have reached 65.

Negotiators for the real estate industry are said to be offering 3 percent over three years. This was the settlement for the 29,000 office building workers of 32J, the sister union of 32B, which was negotiated separately.



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