

Los Angeles janitors strike

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Thousands of Los Angeles area janitors walked off the job Monday evening, April 3, after rejecting a contract offer from building maintenance contractors that would leave their wages at the poverty level. More than 3,000 workers, many of whom are Latin American immigrants, gathered at an outdoor rally Monday in downtown LA and voted overwhelmingly to reject the contractors' offer and strike. Thousands of workers chanted "huelga!, huelga!, huelga!—the Spanish word for strike—and raised red cards signifying their support for the walkout.

On Tuesday, protests by striking janitors snarled downtown traffic and blocked exits on the Harbor and Pasadena freeways. Some 3,000 workers are walking picket lines at some of the plush downtown office buildings, including the corporate headquarters of ARCO oil company and the *Los Angeles Times*, and in Century City, Glendale and Burbank. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1877, which represents the striking workers, says the walkout will be extended daily until all 8,700 unionized janitors in LA County join the strike this Friday.

There have been some confrontations between strikers and scabs being brought in by the contractors by van. On the first day of the strike one picket was reportedly hit by a car, while another had a knife pulled on him by a strikebreaker.

The janitors are among the poorest paid big city janitors in the US. Downtown janitors make an average hourly wage of \$6.80 an hour, plus limited benefits for them and their families. Janitors in the suburbs make even less, receiving the minimum wage, with no family benefits. Jose Morales, 44, among a group of strikers outside the Arco Center, said he earns \$9.40 per hour after 16 years on the job. "It's miserable," he said, "we need better benefits." Another striker originally from Sinaloa, Mexico said, "It is a serious thing to strike, but I don't see any other way to improve our wages."

Negotiations with 18 cleaning contractors—which include San Francisco-based Able Maintenance which cleans hundreds of buildings throughout several major US cities, and ISS, a Denmark-based multinational—broke down March 31 when union leaders asked for \$1-an-hour raises for the next three years.

The contractors are reportedly offering most janitors a one-year pay freeze, followed by a 40 cent-an-hour raise in each of the last two years of the contract. "That's double the national average of wage increases," said Dick Davis, chief negotiator for the companies. Davis added that the contractors had originally offered a five-year wage freeze and made significant concessions from there.

Blanca Gallegos, a union spokesperson, said, "Maintenance workers were making more than \$13 an hour in Los Angeles in the 1980s, before nonunion contractors came in with minimum-wage workers." A leaflet distributed by the strikers explains that wages are so low that many janitors, unable to pay the city's high rents with their earnings, have been forced to double- and triple-up with family, friends and strangers. Many workers, the leaflet notes, are also forced to work extra hours and extra jobs to make ends meet.

In 1981, following a janitors' strike the year before, the contractors replaced unionized workers, many of whom were African-American, with a mostly immigrant workforce from Mexico and Central America. The employers then bitterly opposed any efforts at unionization. Then in the early 1990s rank-and-file janitors began to take action to fight these oppressive conditions. This movement remained chiefly outside of the control and basically ignored by the SEIU and AFL-CIO. In 1991 a march by janitors in the Century City area of Los Angeles was viciously attacked by police. Shortly afterwards the SEIU and the employers signed a contract.

The strike has generated public support. Teamsters truck drivers who deliver packages for United Parcel Service, for example, have said they will honor the janitors' picket lines. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of working people in Los Angeles—black, white and immigrant—can identify with the janitors' demands for improved living standards, particularly in the midst of record profit making on Wall Street and by corporate America.

But as it has done in the past, the SEIU and national AFL-CIO leadership is opposing any genuine mobilization of the working class against big business and its political representatives. On the contrary, the union officials are telling the striking maintenance workers that they can win their struggle through appeals to the Democratic Party. On Tuesday, the SEIU organized delegations of workers to attend the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors and praised the county officials' symbolic gesture of support for the strike. Meanwhile city and county officials have mobilized scores of police to escort scabs across picket lines and have put SWAT teams on tactical alert against the strikers.

The Los Angeles strike is a prelude to contract struggles involving some 100,000 janitors nationwide over the coming months, including those in New York, Chicago, the Silicon Valley and Philadelphia.



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