

Los Angeles janitors strike widens

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On Friday, April 7 thousands of Los Angeles area janitors joined the walkout by maintenance workers that began April 3. All 8,500 unionized janitors in Los Angeles County, or 70 percent of all janitors, are now on strike.

Most janitors, many of whom are Latin American immigrants, earn average hourly wages between \$6.80 and \$7.80. They are fighting for pay increases and improved benefits from an association of 18 large contracting firms that service the offices of some of America's top corporate firms. The contractors are offering downtown Los Angeles janitors an increase of only \$1.30 over three years. At the same time they are demanding that suburban workers—who make the California minimum wage of \$5.75—accept a one-year wage freeze and an 80-cent raise over the next two years. The contractors claim building owners would use nonunion contractors rather than pass on higher costs to commercial occupants, a cost which the union estimates would be about one cent per square foot of office space.

On Thursday, over 2,000 strikers, who are members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Local 1877, held a march and rally in the Century City area of Los Angeles. The janitors marched through a complex of office buildings and a shopping mall in West Los Angeles, holding picket signs and chanting: “Let the rich clean, we are on strike,” and “Yes! We can!” in Spanish.

The janitors have won widespread sympathy among working people. In a city where the wealthy residents of Hollywood and Beverly Hills shamelessly flaunt their riches, it is widely accepted that the janitors who clean toilets and empty garbage cans deserve a living wage. However, the reaction of city officials—including those who, taking into account the popularity of the janitors' cause, have feigned support for the strikers—has been to dispatch hundreds of police to

escort scabs through picket lines and intimidate strikers.

On Thursday morning 23 strikers were arrested for allegedly blocking a freeway ramp during a protest. Later in the day three strikers were arrested at a rally in the Century City area of Los Angeles, where police on bicycles, horses and motorcycles were on hand, while LAPD helicopters flew overhead.

One of the contractors, ABM, which services 500 LA County office buildings, is seeking a court injunction against the strikers. Others are demanding further police protection for the scabs they are sending in by van to replace strikers. A picket captain reported that police have become increasingly provocative, particularly at night when there are no reporters present. At the Wells Fargo bank, in downtown LA, “the police deliberately blanked out a security camera that was our only protection against them,” she said.

The day before, at a march along posh Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, a merchant expressed concern that the aggressive police tactics may result in injuries to the janitors' children who have attended the marches and rallies.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed striking janitors at the Century City rally. Maria Martinez, a grandmother of seven, said, “Every night I clean 200 offices in two floors.” She said that benefits were so bad that her family medical insurance was canceled two months ago. “I had taken one of my grandchildren to the clinic. I found out there that they were no longer insured. We had just gotten a 50 cent raise, which amounts to no raise at all, if there are no benefits.” Martinez attended the rally with four of her grandchildren, noting that “child care is too expensive.”

In Los Angeles County housing costs are very high. It is estimated that the working poor are forced to pay half their take-home pay for rent. Even with two incomes

workers' families are forced to live frugally. In contrast to the luxurious offices that they work in, janitors' housing is substandard and crowded. Often their furniture consists of office discards.

Oscar Colasio has been a janitor for 12 years. "We were the ones who revived the union in 1988," he said. "At first it was only a few buildings. The building owners would switch contractors, or lay off their workers and contract out the work. We are the power here. There is a sense in which we are the lights, the electricity that makes it possible for these offices to function. I would like us to establish, once and for all, the right to a decent and honorable life."

Miguel, who only makes \$7.30 an hour after five years at work, cleans a building in Century City that houses the offices of three of LA's 15 billionaires, including the building's owner.

"Everyone starts at minimum wage," he said. "There is no progression to top pay. Instead we get the raises that were negotiated for that year. It can take many years to reach full pay. My job is to handle recyclable waste for 16 floors. I work from 6:30 at night to 3:00 in the morning. In my building, those that clean offices are required to clean three floors each.

"When I lived in Mexico City, I worked in a factory. We were always struggling, always mobilizing. In the end the government, the union and the owners, without much participation from us, worked out things between them. It always looked like we had won something, but we never made much progress. I think that things ought to be different here."

In contrast to the militancy of the strikers, the SEIU and AFL-CIO leadership is pursuing the same policy that has led to the defeat of one struggle by the working class after another. This centers on telling workers that they can win their fight by appealing to the Democratic Party and pressuring the employers through civil disobedience and other protest tactics.

This fact is underscored by the presence of Reverend Jesse Jackson on the platform of the Century City rally Thursday. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the AFL-CIO bureaucracy brought Jackson before hundreds of similar union rallies to boost illusions in the Democrats, at the very same time the Democrats were joining their Republican counterparts in attacking the working class. In each one of these struggles the union officials in the end blocked any genuine mobilization of working

people against big business and the government, and led these strikes to defeat.



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