

Union officials, Democrats push for end to Los Angeles janitors strike

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Local politicians and the leaders of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the AFL-CIO are working to end the 11-day-old strike by 8,500 janitors in Los Angeles County, on terms that are far short of the workers' demands for living wages.

The maintenance workers, most of whom are Latin American immigrants earning between \$5.75 and \$7.90 an hour, walked out on April 3. An association of 18 maintenance contractors, including major national and international firms, has offered the workers hourly raises between 80 cents and \$1.30 over a three-year period. SEIU Local 1877 originally demanded a \$1 per hour raise in each of the three years, but reports now indicate the union is willing to accept less.

Officially, there are no negotiations going on. However SEIU negotiators and Los Angeles officials, including Republican Mayor Richard Riordan and Cardinal Roger Mahony, have been in contact with the building owners and real estate developers to work out a deal that the contractors would accept. Last Sunday, after the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that negotiators for the contractors might improve their offer, Mike Garcia, president of SEIU Local 1877, declared that the union was willing to retreat on its demands.

The union proposals are already grossly inadequate. Even if workers achieved a \$3 an hour wage increase, this would only bring their annual income to around \$15,000—the official poverty level for a family of four—leaving them unable to pay for basic necessities, particularly in a city with a high cost of living like Los Angeles. The \$3 raise would also leave janitors making far less than their counterparts did in 1980, before contractors broke the union and replaced the employees.

The planned retreat by the union is not due to any

loss of support for the strike. On the contrary, thousands of janitors have engaged in picketing, protests and rallies, defying arrests by the LAPD and violence by strikebreakers. The walkout has disrupted the operations of many office buildings, including the headquarters of some of the biggest US corporations. At the McGuire-Thomas Gas Company Towers in downtown Los Angeles, for instance, workers report that bathrooms with overflowing toilets were being shut down because scab janitorial crews could not carry out essential maintenance tasks.

During the week additional maintenance workers joined the walkout in the San Fernando Valley, Pasadena, Long Beach, Ventura, the LA International Airport, and in San Diego, about 110 miles south of Los Angeles. Thousands of other maintenance workers have expressed support for the strike during protests in other major US cities, such as Chicago, New York, Philadelphia and Portland, Oregon, where contracts covering more than 100,000 workers are expiring in the coming weeks and months.

The janitors' struggle has also inspired other low-wage workers in the region to fight for improved conditions. On Tuesday, April 11, home health care workers in San Mateo County in central California interrupted midday traffic during a protest for higher wages. Helmeted police arrested dozens of SEIU Local 715 members, who make little more than the minimum wage.

Moreover, the strike has won widespread sympathy among working and middle class people throughout Los Angeles because it has called attention to the deep social and economic divide in the area. There is widespread feeling that in a city where movie stars and corporate executives flaunt their wealth workers should earn a decent standard of living.

Typical were the comments of a word processor at the strikebound Arco Plaza tower, who told the *Los Angeles Times* that he and most coworkers supported the janitors' demands. "They're taking care of people who make millions," he said. "What's another dollar?" The strike has even won sympathy from more privileged sections of the population, as was shown in the recent anonymous donation of \$500,000 to the janitors' strike fund.

Given these favorable conditions, why is the SEIU willing to settle for so little, so fast? One reason is that the union officials do not want the strike to disrupt their relations with the Democratic Party. This summer Los Angeles and Philadelphia will host the Democratic and Republican presidential conventions. The AFL-CIO has already agreed not to have any strikes in Philadelphia during that time and a similar agreement is being negotiated for Los Angeles. No doubt a speedy resolution of the janitors' strike is part of this process.

The AFL-CIO bureaucracy is throwing millions of dollars behind the presidential campaign of Al Gore and wants to prevent any struggles that would expose the Democrats for what they are: defenders of big business, like their Republican counterparts. Moreover, the union officials want to dissipate any momentum towards a national strike by maintenance and other low-paid workers.

SEIU and AFL-CIO officials have brought Jesse Jackson and other Democrats before workers and promoted them as "friends of labor." They have told workers their struggle could be won by getting city councilmen and county supervisors to pass resolutions in favor of the janitors. One of those who sponsored a recent resolution was Democratic Assembly Member Gilbert Cedillo, a former leader of SEIU Local 660, notorious for imposing sell-out contracts on county workers.

The union officials' alliance with the Democrats blocks any genuine struggle to mobilize support by the janitors strike. This very same strategy has led to the isolation and defeat of one strike after another over the last 20 years.

The overriding concern of the union officials is not winning a decent contract for janitors, but preserving their relations with the employers and the Democrats. From the onset of the SEIU's "justice for janitors" campaign in the mid-1980s, union officials have sought

to contain the militancy of these workers and demonstrate to the employers that the union could be worked with. Throughout this period the SEIU has stressed that it is not seeking substantial wage increases, but "fairness."

On these terms, the contractors, who had gotten rid of the union in Los Angeles in 1981, had little problem signing a contract that allowed them to keep paying poverty-level wages. The SEIU bureaucracy also benefited from this arrangement, as the influx of thousands of dues-paying members helped bolster its sagging membership rolls.

In the cities where it has locals, the SEIU now says it represents up to 90 percent of all service workers. In Washington, DC union membership went from 40 percent to 77 percent over the past five years. In Denver the union represents 75 percent of workers, up from zero five years ago. These organizing "successes" boosted the former president of the SEIU, John Sweeney, to the top spot in the AFL-CIO bureaucracy.



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