

New York services union and building owners reach tentative pact

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On Wednesday, April 19, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 32B-32J, representing 26,000 workers, reached a tentative agreement with the real estate industry, more than one day before the old contract expired at 12:01 a.m. Friday.

On Thursday, April 20 the 18-member Board of Directors of the Reality Advisory Board on Labor Relations, representing the owners of about 3,000 residential buildings, voted unanimously to ratify the agreement. The union membership will only be given a week after they receive their ballots to mail in their votes.

The SEIU Local 32B-32J leadership was originally demanding a wage hike of 10 percent a year for a three-year contract. The doormen, porters and elevator operators that comprise the membership of the union believed that this increase was justified by the fact that they have shared in very little of the prosperity that the landlords have been enjoying as a result of the current real estate boom.

The building owners, on the other hand, were insisting that wage hikes be held to 3 percent a year. The tentative agreement comes very close to their position, providing for wage increases of only 3.5 percent per year. This will mean that the annual base salary of the workers will only increase from \$31,076 to \$34,352 at the end of the three-year contract.

Negotiators for the real estate industry praised the accord, noting that they could afford the modest wage hike at a time when rents and condominium prices are skyrocketing. The union local's trustee, Michael Fishman, attempted to put a more positive spin on the contract for the workers by referring to its other provisions, such as the one providing computer training for the membership.

However, Mr. Fishman admitted that the union failed to achieve its goal of making it easier to unionize janitors in the suburbs. Neither side would discuss whether or not the realty board achieved its goal of making it easier for them to lay off workers.

Even though the same local also represents 29,000 workers in the city's commercial buildings, they have a totally separate contract. In 1998 they reached an agreement with only a 3 percent wage hike per year.

Union members were ready to fight for a better settlement this time around. They voted on March 22 to authorize their leadership to strike, and more than 10,000 marched during rush hour on April 12 to express their determination to win their demands. Their last strike took place in 1991 and lasted for 12 days.

A central element in the contract dispute was the attempt of the SEIU bureaucracy to put a more militant and democratic face to its leadership. Michael Fishman took control of the union in September, replacing Gus Bevona, who was forced into retirement due to the openly corrupt and dictatorial manner in which he ran the union for two decades.

Bevona used his position to achieve a lavish lifestyle based on a more than \$400,000 annual salary and a swanky penthouse at union headquarters. Of more significance, as far as the union tops were concerned, was the fact that the local lost 15,000 members and their dues in the last decade alone.

It was with the goal of providing the union with a badly needed facelift that Michael Fishman was put in place as the trustee of the New York local about seven months ago. Under pressure to prove just how democratic the union has become under his guidance, he brought in 50 union officials and members to the bargaining table. In an attempt to prove the value of this new democratic leadership, he spoke to the rank

and file in the most militant terms, demanding an annual 10 percent wage hike and threatening to call a strike for anything less.



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