New York building cleaners oppose two-tier wage system

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Hundreds of commercial building cleaners rallied in Downtown Manhattan on Thursday as contract negotiations continued between their union, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 32BJ, and the Realty Advisory Board (RAB), an industry association representing most building owners. The union represents building cleaners at more than 1,500 New York City office buildings.

The city's 22,000 building cleaners are determined to resist attempts by the owners to introduce a two-tier wage system under which newly hired workers would get less compensation than existing employees and receive fewer benefits. They fear that the second tier of workers will eventually be used to replace the first tier with lower paid workers. The owners have also proposed changes in work rules and health benefits. Health benefits for office cleaners currently include full family medical insurance.

On December 1, thousands of building cleaners voted to authorize their bargaining committee to call a strike over wages and benefits. Recent weeks have seen growing support for the building cleaners among other sections of workers in New York City. Thousands of transit workers and nurses across the city are facing similar attacks as their contracts expire. The city's building cleaners have also gained the support of office cleaners throughout the country.

The workers have made it clear they are willing to go on strike if a deal is not reached before their contract expires this weekend. But the bureaucrats in control of the union are scrambling to reach a last-minute deal behind the backs of the workers and avoid a strike.

"This is kind of a tester, to get the workers ready and to also show the public that this can happen at any time after the contract expires at 12:01 midnight January 1," one protester attending Thursday's rally told NY1 television station. "We're going to fight this until the bitter end and if the owners don't like it, tough," said another worker.

The owners claim that the office vacancy rate in the city has soared while rents have decreased by half. They insist that changes be made to the cleaners' compensation package due to decreasing revenues and increased expenses. In reality, New York is widely considered to be the healthiest real estate market in the United States. According to the *New York Daily News*, the $20 billion Manhattan real estate industry just had its strongest third quarter in three years, with sales activity in the borough reaching $6.3 billion.

In seeking to justify their attack on wages and benefits, the owners have tried to portray the building cleaners as overpaid. The top rate for building cleaners represented by 32BJ is $22.65 per hour, about $47,000 for a full-time worker. "That figure is about $12,000 less than studies by Penn State University and the University of Washington have determined is needed by a family of four to survive in New York," according to the *Daily News*.

Carmen Perez, an office cleaner who has worked at the same building on Lexington Avenue for the past 26 years, told the *New York Times* she was outraged by the proposed cuts. She said it was difficult for a family to make ends meet in the city on less than $50,000 per year, especially when her mortgage costs $2,000 per month. "How can I pay for health insurance with the money I make?" she said. "I'm trying to put my two children through college without any debt. I want my kids to have a better life. I don't want my kids to struggle like I did."

The building cleaners have gained widespread support among ordinary New Yorkers.

A recent survey conducted by Public Policy Polling

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showed that 64 percent of city residents think the cleaners deserve raises for their hard work. The survey also showed that 82 percent of New Yorkers think $47,000 is not enough to raise a family in the city with the highest cost of living in the country, and 68 percent think full-time workers earning $47,000 a year need a raise to keep up with the spiraling cost of living.

Despite the widespread support gained by the building cleaners, the bureaucrats at 32BJ have made no attempt to reach out to other sections of workers facing similar attacks on their wages and benefits. Instead, the union has fought to keep the struggle of the building workers isolated and prevent it from broadening into a larger movement of workers. The union has limited the struggle to the bankrupt strategy of one-day protests and appeals to Democratic politicians to intervene.

Negotiations between 32BJ and the owners continued on Friday. One of the city's largest landlords, who requested not to be named because he lacked authorization to speak on behalf of the real estate industry, told the *New York Times* that a compromise was possible on the industry's initial proposal of a 2 percent increase in the third year of the contract but no pay raises in the other three years. Such an "increase" would in fact amount to a wage cut since it would fail to keep up with inflation.

Over the past few days, building cleaners in more than 12 cities across the country, including Chicago, Los Angeles and Boston, signed petitions stating their intention to honor picket lines in case a strike by New York building cleaners spread outside the city.

Should a strike take place, however, the bureaucracy will move quickly to isolate the struggle of the workers. In order to avoid strike action, the union reached tentative agreements this week with owners of office buildings in New Jersey, where it represents 7,000 building cleaners, and in Connecticut, where it represents 2,000 workers.

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