

Janitors in Houston, Texas go on strike

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About 250 Houston janitors walked off the job at nine buildings in the downtown and Greenway Plaza areas of Houston, Texas on July 10, in a continuing dispute over renewal of a labor contract that expired at the end of May. The janitors had voted unanimously on May 26 for the strike.

Additional janitors later joined those who first walked out, with the total number involved now at about 400. The Service Employee International Union (SEIU) has said that it plans to call out members in other cities beginning today.

Janitors are employed by cleaning contracting companies such as ABM, Pritchard, ISS, and GCA, to work in the office buildings of some of Houston's, and the world's, wealthiest corporations.

Janitors in Houston are terribly paid, even relative to other janitors in the US. On average, they earn less than \$9,000 a year on wages of \$8.35 an hour. That is, most do not have full time positions.

The companies are proposing a contract that would raise wages to \$8.85 an hour by 2016—i.e., 50 cents over four years. The SEIU has countered with a proposal to raise the wage to only \$10 an hour, still poverty-level wages.

Workers have also expressed concern that the companies have halted contributions to employer health care funds, prompting speculation that they plan on eliminating them altogether. According to the *Houston Chronicle*, a spokesman for the companies involved said that their proposal also included additional employee contributions for health care—which would likely more than reverse any meager increase in pay.

The current strike has followed a series of one-day actions called by the SEIU. Last month, eleven janitors working for Pritchard were barred from returning from work after a one-day strike.

Some sense of the plight of the janitors is conveyed by an eight-minute video clip produced by the SEIU.

However, the SEIU offers them only the meager perspective of trying to embarrass the office cleaning contracting companies to "agree to decent wages." An SEIU statement concludes by stating, "These contractors can do right by working people ... by agreeing to decent wages and benefits for our communities."

In 2006, over 3,000 Houston janitors struck for higher wages. Then as now, the SEIU is isolating the striking workers, while also using it as a part of its public relations efforts, particularly in the run-up to the 2012 elections. The union will campaign aggressive for Obama, who the SEIU endorsed in November. Obama has presided over a historic attack on the living conditions of workers throughout the country, but has done so by working in collaboration with the union apparatus.

This past week, the SEIU used the opportunity provided by the 103rd National Convention of the NAACP, held in Houston, to allow local and national democrats to cynically posture as supporters for the janitors. Four janitors were brought in to meet with Vice President Joe Biden.

Several Democratic Party politicians and their supporters had their photo-ops before flying out, including Texas Democratic Congressmen Al Green and Sheila Jackson Lee and NAACP President Benjamin Todd Jealous.



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