

Houston janitors ratify labor contract

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The month-long janitors' strike in Houston, Texas concluded Saturday with janitors approving a new agreement between the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and several major cleaning contractors—ABM Janitorial Services, GCA Services, ISS Facility Services, and Pritchard—who employ them to clean the office buildings of numerous large corporations.

About 400 janitors, members of the Service Employees' International Union (SEIU), voted to accept the deal. They have been without a contract since May 31.

The agreement, promoted by the SEIU, will guarantee continued poverty-level wages for the janitors, raising wages by only \$1 over the course of four years, from \$8.35 to \$9.35. This is a 12 percent wage increase, which will barely meet inflation over the course of the contract.

“This is a huge victory for janitors and so many workers,” bargaining committee member Adriana Vasquez declared.

Another issue involved in the strike was concern among janitors that several of the companies had ceased paying into their health care funds, raising alarms that health care would be slashed or cut completely. The new contract does not appear to address this issue.

The average wage for Houston janitors is miserable, at around \$9,000 per year before the new contract. Even compared to the paltry janitors' wages in other cities around the country, Houston janitors are underpaid. And they are overworked: Houston janitors reportedly get six hours to do work that janitors in other cities get eight hours to complete.

The agreement also includes a provision allowing the companies to pay lower wages at smaller buildings. If they are unlucky enough to work in a building of less than 200,000 square feet, they will get as little as \$7.25

an hour.

The SEIU, which claims two million members in all fifty states, has only involved some 400 janitors in the strike in Houston, only organizing a smattering of one-day “solidarity” demonstrations in other cities.

The deliberate isolation of the janitors by the SEIU during the month-long strike is highlighted by the fact that the deal in Houston comes at the same time as a possible strike among janitors organized in the SEIU in San Francisco. Rather than carry out a united struggle, the SEIU was determined to get a deal in Houston before any strike in San Francisco.

Houston's mayor Annise Parker, a Democrat, put out a press release on July 20 in which she sought to put forward a pro-worker tone. When the cleaning companies and the SEIU reached an impasse over the terms, the contractors folded their arms and refused to negotiate further. Parker then urged the cleaning contractors to return to the negotiating table.

“Their unwillingness to talk has left the union with no other choice but civil disobedience,” Parker said. “The union has made good-faith offers. Now it's time for the janitorial contractors to sit back down at the table to work out an agreement that is fair and just.”

Parker's intervention helped secure a deal between the companies and the SEIU—at the expense of the janitors.



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