14,000-strong New England janitors union authorizes strike action

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Members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 615 voted September 22 to authorize a strike if cleaning companies do not reach an agreement with the bargaining committee before the current contract runs out on September 30. The local represents 14,000 janitors covered by the master contract in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New Hampshire.

At issue in the struggle are wages, part-time work and health insurance. Cleaning contractors in Boston, including ABM, Janitronics and UNICCO, are proposing language in the new contract that could potentially wipe out any gains janitors have made over the last decade. New England janitors were engaged in a bitter strike 10 years ago, in 2002.

Janitors clean the offices and businesses of some of the largest and most profitable companies in the area and indeed the world, including Fidelity, State Street Bank, the John Hancock final companies, Genzyme, Novartis and Dunkin Donuts. But they are paid what amounts to poverty wages and are often given only part-time work, forcing workers to work two or three jobs in an effort to make ends meet.

The cleaning contractors are offering only a 25 cent raise a year; only 20 cents for suburban janitors. More than 40 of Boston's biggest commercial buildings are covered by the contract. While hoarding cash provided by federal stimulus measures, and bringing in record profits, they and their cleaning companies are refusing to provide a livable wage and basic social rights for the workers who keep their offices clean.

Despite provisions in the current contract that mandate full-time hours for workers in many of Boston's biggest office buildings, more than two thirds of the workers covered by the contract are relegated to part-time schedules. A statement on the SEIU Local 615 web site notes that employers did not honor the "promises" they made about the issue during negotiations in 2007.

Under the current contract, hourly wages for cleaners of office buildings in suburban Boston are $12.59, which, even with a 40-hour workweek, is about equal to the federal poverty level for a family of four. The average part-time janitor earns an average of $16,588—just about the federal poverty level of $15,130.

The highest hourly wage listed in the contract—for full-time workers in Boston—is only $16.10. But many janitors are only offered 20 hours a week. For janitors in the downtown Boston area, their monthly pay is nearly $500 less than the average regional rent of $1,796 a month. Many earn as little as $56 a day cleaning the equivalent of 15 single-family homes every night.

Universities and other non-profits also benefit from the low wages. At Northeastern University—which charges more than $53,000 a year for tuition, room and board—workers covered by the contract clean more than 70 buildings between the hours of 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.

Under the current contract, negotiated between the local and an industry organization called the Maintenance Contractors of New England, health insurance is provided only to workers whose regular schedules are more than 29 hours per week. Part-time workers are eligible only for dental coverage. Not only does this practice force janitors to work multiple jobs, but it also deprives them of health insurance in a state that already penalizes workers who do not have medical coverage.

Unused vacation cannot be carried forward from year to year, and employers can use "operational needs" as an excuse for denying the vacation benefits listed in the contract. The only retirement benefit is a defined

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benefit plan to which employers contribute 55 cents per hour for full-time workers and 20 cents for part-timers. Contributions for full-time workers were reduced so that part-timers could receive this measly credit, without costing employers anything extra.

The current contract, signed by Local 615 President Rocio Saenz in October 2007, covers Massachusetts and Rhode Island. It requires that a “financial core fee” be paid by workers who do not join the union, thereby ensuring revenues for the local.

On September 26, the employers’ organization released a venomous statement threatening to lay off more than 3,500 workers if the union persists in demanding wage increases. The statement also points out that in cities such New York, Philadelphia, and Denver, the SEIU has settled for much lower raises than it is seeking in Boston.

In New England, the union has sought to pressure local Democratic Party politicians for leverage. The Boston City Council passed a resolution in support of the union, and Lt. Governor Tim Murray was an invited speaker at a Local 615 Labor Day event, where he pledged support for the “middle class,” and stated that “we want companies to do well. We want the leaders of companies to do well.”

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