

New York City airport workers' job action called off by union

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A 24-hour strike planned to begin at 10 p.m. Wednesday night by about 1,200 workers at two New York City major airports has been called off. This comes after the workers unanimously voted for the job action on Tuesday. The strike was cancelled by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) 32BJ, which is seeking to represent the workers.

The workers include security guards who are not part of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), as well as baggage handlers and wheelchair attendants. They are employed by Aviation Safeguards (AVSG), a subsidiary of Command Security, and have been engaged in a three-year campaign to obtain a raise in their wages from \$10.10 per hour, only recently mandated by the Port Authority, which runs the airports, to \$15.00, along with affordable health care benefits and the right to join a union.

Many airport workers live below the poverty line and rely on government assistance to survive. Some receive no assistance at all. One LaGuardia worker, Chennee Cooper, works 40 hours a week but lives in a shelter because she cannot afford an apartment. This is at a time when airlines are making significant profits due to layoffs, low fuel prices and criminal activities.

A strike would have affected Delta Airlines, a major US carrier, and several other airlines that contract with AVSG for the workers' services. The airline had stated that it was taking measures to ensure that its operations would not be disrupted.

The walkout was cancelled when an agreement was reached between AVSG and the SEIU 32BJ that allows employees at both the John F. Kennedy International and LaGuardia Airports to join the union. Under the agreement, the company will recognize the 32BJ as the employees' union of choice if a majority of the workers sign cards authorizing the union to be their

bargaining agent.

Command Security and its subsidiary released a statement that the company has reached an agreement guaranteeing "labor peace" with the union, and further stated that "[t]his process guarantees that the employees of AVSG will maintain their right to join a union or not."

At an earlier news conference, union supporters had charged that the company had threatened to fire workers for union organizing. The company CEO, Craig Coy, denied the accusation and claimed that it is not anti-union.

Hector Figueroa, president of 32BJ, told reporters, "We are pleased to announce that the voices of 1,200 workers have been heard." However, negotiations for the contractual demands have not even begun.

Assuming a majority of workers sign up for the union, 32BJ has stated that negotiations on wages and benefits are not expected to begin until this fall. While the union is hoping to increase its membership and dues base, the reality is that the goal of a \$15 per hour is itself far from adequate for lifting workers out of poverty in a city with among the highest costs of living in the world.

This agreement coincides with the recommendation of a panel appointed by Democratic governor Andrew A. Cuomo that the minimum wage be raised for fast-food chain restaurant employees to \$15 per hour in partial increments by the end of 2018 in the city and 2021 in the rest of the state. The recommendation is expected to be put into effect by the state's acting commissioner of labor. The long lead times mean that the real value of these nominal increases will have significantly decreased by the time they are implemented.

The New York move is a part of similar ones in

various cities throughout the country, and coincides with the attempt by a section of the trade union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party to blunt the tremendous anger among workers over chronic unemployment and deteriorating wages and benefits, especially following the 2008 crash, with minimal measures.

The reality is that after years of decline in the real value of wages, even \$15 per hour would leave workers with a much lower standard of living than they had decades ago. These losses are the direct result of collaboration by unions across the country with “their” corporations.

The primary goal of unions, such as the SEIU, is to increase their dues base by demonstrating that they can manage the workforce by keeping labor costs down and avoiding unrest. Airport workers should place no confidence in this union to fight for their interests. Last year, the SEIU in California sponsored \$15/hour wage legislation that specifically excluded unionized workplaces.



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