

San Joaquin County, California strikers sent back to work with no contract

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The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) shut down a three-day unfair labor practices strike by thousands of San Joaquin County, California public employees Thursday after three days on the picket line. The nearly 4,400 workers, whose contract expired June 30, are still without a collective bargaining agreement.

SEIU Local 1021 is the bargaining agent for the county workers, whose jobs include hospital techs, road maintenance, sewer maintenance, park workers, juvenile hall behavioral health services and many other important public service jobs.

The exact number of workers who took part in the strike is still unclear. The union claims there were well over 1,000 participants, despite an injunction filed by San Joaquin County officials the week prior to the strike which kept at least 200 SEIU members, who are classified as "essential employees," from joining the picket lines.

Last week union officials and county negotiators failed to reach an agreement on a new contract after three months of negotiations. The most contentious issue in the negotiations was the county's proposal of a dismal 6 percent wage increase over the course of three years, a figure that would not even manage to cover the rate of inflation, currently around 2.2 percent annually in California. The union is asking for a 14 percent increase over the same period of time.

While county workers' salaries vary depending on the position, a large number are paid as little as \$12-\$15 an hour. Union officials reported that, on the whole, county workers are being paid less now than they were five years ago. SEIU spokesman Steve Stallone said this was due to contract changes in recent years forcing workers to cover more of their own health insurance costs, essentially resulting in a pay cut.

Another major issue is the failure of the county to fill

some 800 positions, which have been budgeted but still remain vacant. The understaffing has led to stress and safety concerns for workers and the public at large.

The issue is most pronounced at San Joaquin General Hospital, where employees have complained that understaffing has affected patient care quality. The 400 SEIU members employed at the hospital were not called out for the strike on Tuesday or Wednesday but did walk out on Thursday. The hospital management was given advance notice and the strike did not shut down the facility.

The SEIU leadership has called the return to work "a good faith gesture." Talks with county officials are set to resume Tuesday. The union called the strike a "success," despite its failure to achieve a contract settlement. SEIU officials lamely asserted that county negotiators have now been authorized to bargain past their initial 6 percent wage increase proposal.

The stagnating wages and increased health care costs facing county workers are part of the continuing fallout from the 2008 economic crisis that triggered an immense statewide budget deficit between 2008 and 2012 and led to brutal attacks on the jobs and living standards of public workers. Democratic Governor Jerry Brown, who took office in 2011, has responded to the crisis by systematically wiping out workers' retirement and health benefits, drastically cutting social services, and taking away billions from both K-12 and higher education.

The SEIU, along with virtually every other major union in California, devoted millions of dollars in workers' dues to support the Brown campaign, despite his open threat to cut state worker pensions. In 2013 Brown enacted major changes to California pensions. His administration raised the minimum retirement age from 55 to 67 and from age 50 to 57 for public safety

workers. Pension contribution rates for workers were increased to 50 percent, while a maximum pension benefit was also put into place for the first time for all workers, regardless of salary.

In June some 12,000 California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) workers were saddled with an effective pay decrease under terms of a sellout agreement imposed by the International Union of Operating Engineers. The deal included a 10 percent pay raise over four years. The meager raise will be offset by a requirement that workers divert an additional 4.1 percent of salaries to fund pensions.

Meanwhile, some 16,000 workers at AT&T West in California and Nevada, members of the Communications Workers of America, are still working without a contract.



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