

SEIU cuts short three-day strike of New York airport workers

Isaac Finn
13 July 2017

On Tuesday roughly 700 New York City area airport workers at Newark Liberty International Airport, John F. Kennedy and LaGuardia walked off the job at 9PM, as part of a planned three-day strike. The action was called off the following day after contract service company PrimeFlight Inc. agreed to bargain with 32BJ of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

The workers involved in the strike included hundreds of wheelchair attendants, skycaps, baggage handlers, customer service agents, cabin cleaners, terminal cleaners and shuttle drivers who are employed by PrimeFlight Inc. The company subcontracts its workers to major airlines, including United Airlines, American Airlines, and JetBlue.

Workers voted earlier this week for the strike in response to unfair labor practices by the company. They have particularly taken issue with the company providing insufficient time for cabin cleaners to go through security checks while cleaning airplanes.

One customer service worker told *PIX 11*, during the strike on Tuesday, "We're here standing together, fighting for what we believe in—for our rights. It's not just for me, it's for every single worker that works here."

PrimeFlight Inc. has developed a reputation for illegal labor practices, and has regularly withheld wages from workers. According to officials from 32BJ, the company has been forced to pay \$3.3 million in penalties and settlements since 2005. Last year the company also agreed to issue \$1.8 million in back pay to 152 airport workers in Seattle.

Workers in New Jersey filed a suit against PrimeFlight for wage theft last fall, and workers in New York filed a similar suit earlier this year.

The strike was called after workers worked for months without a contract while SEIU 32BJ claimed

PrimeFlight refused to bargain.

According to officials from 32BJ, the workers are not easily replaceable because many of the positions require security clearance. Kevin Brown, vice president of 32BJ SEIU, estimated that over 10 percent of the service employees at Newark are contracted through PrimeFlight.

Despite the militancy of the workers, the union has worked to keep them isolated while attempting to foster illusions in the Democratic Party. Prior to calling off the strike, the union allowed local Democratic Party politicians to posture as supporters of the workers by making appearances at the pickets set up on Wednesday morning.

Meanwhile, New Jersey Democratic Senator Cory Booker requested that PrimeFlight restart negotiations.

A separate strike by 32BJ at Philadelphia International Airport was called off after American Airlines agreed to last minute discussions.

The union had not arranged for workers at the Philadelphia Airport to participate in the limited three-day strike, but instead filed a charge with the National Labor Relations Board on July 11 against PrimeFlight. 32BJ accused the company of refusing to bargain in good faith and making coercive statements.

"It's time for everyone to sit down, talk, and act like adults" said Kevin Brown, talking like a management representative. "The strikes are disrupting passengers' travel plans, and if we can agree to living wages and a right to organize at Newark, which is an engine for economic growth, then we are only building a stronger community in New Jersey."

The union is notorious for engaging in limited stunts in order to disorient workers and dissipate their anger. In 2015 it canceled a 24-hour strike of workers employed by Aviation Safeguards (AVSG) at two New

York City airports. In exchange the union got the right to bargain on behalf of workers, and increase its own dues base.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact