

Silicon Valley public service workers complete day two of “rolling” strike

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On Thursday, 1,200 public service workers struck for the second day at eighteen separate facilities throughout Santa Clara County, California. Santa Clara County is the sixth most populous county in the state and, as the home of Silicon Valley, includes the headquarters of Apple, Google and Intel among other large tech firms.

Santa Clara County public employees are taking to the picket lines for the first time in 40 years demanding better working conditions, higher wages, and to protest unfair labor practices. Their strike is unfolding as 48,000 auto workers continue to strike for their third week against General Motors and is part of the growing mood of militancy of workers throughout the US and internationally.

The strike was organized by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 521 which has 12,000 members in Santa Clara County, including hospital janitors, social workers, mental health providers, and clerical staff as well as workers in parks, maintenance yards, libraries, jails, and county offices.

In an effort to isolate and demoralize their membership, SEIU is “rolling out” the strike telling only small sections of the union the night before that they will be on strike the next day. On Thursday, out of a membership of 12,000, only 1,200 workers were called out according to SEIU spokesman Victor Gamiz.

According to a county website issuing strike updates, day two of the strike resulted in the closure of three health clinics, two pharmacies, one WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) office, and the Office of Vital Records and Registration operating at minimal capacity.

Since August, workers have attended Santa Clara County board of supervisor meetings to file complaints concerning working conditions, unfair labor practices, the rising cost of living and issues with understaffing,

including filling positions for mental health services.

SEIU officials claim the county unilaterally restructured changes in the Department of Family and Children's Services without bargaining with employees, citing the county's decision to close San Jose Resource Center.

Workers have been working without a contract since June and SEIU Local 521 officials are still in contract negotiations with the Santa Clara County Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and board of supervisors. Continued negotiations are scheduled throughout this week amidst strike action.

During negotiations in September, the Santa Clara County CEO Jeffrey Smith and the board of supervisors offered a 3 percent salary increase each year over the course of 5 years. The County is also asking for employees to pay an additional \$1.50 from each paycheck toward retirement health benefits and increase their share of health premiums by 2 percent. This is on top of the fact that the paltry wage increase does not take into consideration the rising cost of living or inflation in California's San Francisco Bay Area, which hosts one of the country's highest costs of living.

In a statement Thursday, Smith stated, “The county's proposal for SEIU employees provides a fair wage and an equitable contract that will allow the county to sustain services for those who need them most.”

At a rally at the Family Resource Center on Wednesday, Riko Mendez, chief elected officer of SEIU Local 521 said that workers are prepared to continue striking until the county agrees to a fair contract.

CEO Smith relayed that the county had been preparing for the strike for weeks, and that the SEIU has allowed essential service workers to cross the

picket line, noting that, “we don’t have any evidence that they’re [the striking workers] impacting Social Services significantly.”

While SEIU has declared that the strike will continue indefinitely there is every indication that at any moment the strike will be called off for prolonged negotiations in which a sell-out contract will be determined. The rollout schedule is designed to maximize the uncertainty for workers and those who depend on county services while minimizing the impact on the county bosses.

County workers only receive a message in the evening describing whether they are to report to the picket lines or back to their jobs the next morning.

This Santa Clara County strike is unfolding in the wake of a betrayal by the SEIU of health care workers throughout California and across the US. Within the last month, the union called off a strike of 85,000 workers at the Kaiser Permanente health care giant which was to span the states of California, Oregon, Washington, Colorado, Maryland and Virginia, as well as Washington DC.

The tentative agreement was presented less than two weeks before a strike date of October 14, following a near unanimous vote of workers authorizing action. Leading up to the strike, workers complained to reporting teams of the *World Socialist Web Site* that they had been kept in the dark about the details of the strike and its demands.

County workers, particularly those providing health care and social services are confronted with the full social crisis in the Bay Area. Without sufficient pay and faced with chronic understaffing they are in many cases the only avenue of support for workers and youth facing homelessness and hunger as a result of the ever-rising cost of living.

In order to win the resources necessary for a livable wage and safe working conditions, Santa Clara county workers must expand their struggle and prevent its isolation or termination by linking up with health care workers at Kaiser and other sections of workers throughout the state and beyond. They must oppose the years of budget cuts carried out by the Democratic party at the state and county level. Such a struggle requires the formation of rank-and-file committees organized by the workers themselves to break out of the straitjacket imposed by the SEIU’s limited strike.



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