

Workers at Cleveland Public Library cast near-unanimous vote to authorize strike action

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On January 8, roughly 400 librarians, assistants and custodians at the Cleveland Public Library (CPL) cast “an overwhelming, and nearly unanimous vote” to authorize a strike, according to a statement sent out by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) 1199. The vote took place only a few days after the previous three-year contract negotiated between the SEIU and CPL administration expired on December 31.

Despite the vote, the SEIU bargaining committee has not set a strike date and is required to give 10 days notice to the library administration before a walkout. SEIU and library administrators are scheduled to sit down for negotiations on January 17 and 23.

The last strike of library workers was in 2004, when the SEIU called a token one-day strike.

According to statements by SEIU officials, the library administration is proposing between 30 and 40 contract issues that workers will not find acceptable. A central focus in SEIU’s statements is the proposed 1.5 percent raise for library workers—many of whom are still impacted by a five-year wage freeze implemented in 2009, failure to adequately increase staffing and concerns over library security.

CPL administrators, meanwhile, are paid top dollar. CPL CEO Felton Thomas Jr. will receive a raise from \$184,000 to \$220,000 after signing a new employment agreement at the start of this year. He also received a \$10,000 bonus and a 5 percent annual pay increase. Jeremiah Swetel, the CPL’s Chief Operations Officer, is slated to receive a \$50,000 bonus in 2024 based on a contract approved last September.

The CPL is also in the middle of a project to renovate all 27 neighborhood branches of the library system over the next 10 years with an estimated cost of more than

\$100 million. The project will be funded by bonds backed by an increase in the property tax levy. A separate project costing another \$65 million is planned to renovate the main library.

The library workers voting to authorize a strike is an expression of the growing militancy among workers in the US and internationally, who are outraged by decades of concessions and austerity. But the SEIU and library officials are dedicated to avoiding a strike or keeping the action isolated.

On the day of the strike authorization vote, the SEIU issued a contract fact sheet that concluded with the “fact” that the “Cleveland Public Library leaders are now publicly discussing the potential impact of a strike—bargaining committee members are concerned that this will be used to harm the perceptions of the dedicated workers with the library system.”

In reality, a stand by library workers would win widespread support because workers throughout the country are mobilizing against social inequality in the form of strikes and protests. This has been particularly concentrated among teachers, hundreds of thousands of whom have participated in strikes since 2018, who are motivated not only to defend their own living conditions, but to defend the right to a quality public education. The implication of the SEIU’s statement is that, in the event of a strike, it will not seek to mobilize larger section of workers in defense librarians, assistants, and the custodial staff but instead work to isolate them.

The current conditions facing library workers is the direct product of the SEIU’s own policy of subjugating workers’ interests to the Democratic Party. The SEIU was a major backer of the Obama administration, even

as the candidate of “hope and change” implemented policies responsible for the largest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top of society.

On the local level, the SEIU helped impose major concessions, including approving a five-year wage freeze and unpaid furlough days in 2008. They sought to divert workers into a toothless campaign appealing to the Ohio House and Senate to increase funding to the Public Library Fund. After a modest increase in funding from 1.68 percent of the state’s general revenue fund to 1.7 percent, the SEIU encouraged people to send a note to the state government thanking them for this derisory increase and asking for more funding in the future.

In reality, state funding has been cut to the bone for years. The Ohio Library Council estimates that “state funding for public libraries has been cut by more than \$113 million since 2001,” or roughly a 23 percent reduction. This is in spite of the council’s estimates that Ohio has the highest library usage per capita of any state in the US.

Any serious defense of living conditions, libraries and public education requires workers to engage in a political fight in direct conflict with the Democrats and Republicans, as well as organizations like the SEIU that have worked to suppress strikes and force through concessions.



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