

SEIU reaches tentative agreement at Cleveland Public Library in attempt to avert strike

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On the evening of January 23, Cleveland Public Library (CPL) and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) 1199 reached a tentative agreement covering roughly 400 librarians, assistants and custodians, potentially averting a strike. The agreement was reached two days after the SEIU issued a 10-day strike notice announcing a walkout at noon on February 4.

Anthony Caldwell, an SEIU 1199 spokesperson, in an email to 3News explained, “The details of the tentative agreement shall remain confidential until all bargaining unit members have a chance to review and vote on the agreement on Wednesday, January 29th.

“If ratified by the members of the SEIU District 1199 next week, the agreement will take effect immediately and a strike will be averted.”

Many library workers who spoke with reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* said that they had been “kept in the dark” about the details of the tentative agreement, and had been told that they would only receive more information during the contract vote itself next week.

While the details are being kept under wraps, the fact that the SEIU is forcing workers to vote before they have had adequate time to study the contract is the clearest sign that the deal is a sellout. This is a time-tested strategy which the unions employ to slip past unpopular concessions under the noses of workers—including last year’s contract at Fiat Chrysler

Library workers have been working without a contract since the previous three-year contract expired on December 31. If workers reject the tentative agreement and the strike goes forward it will be the first

strike of library workers since 2004, when the SEIU called a token one-day strike.

On January 8, 300 library workers participated in a strike authorization vote held by the SEIU, with 92 percent voting in favor. The vote is a reflection of the determination of workers to fight back against concessions and social inequality. This finds an egregious expression within the CPL system, where the library administration initially proposed a mere 1.5 percent raise for workers—who have already experienced a five-year wage freeze and the introduction of furlough days in 2009.

In comparison, CPL executive director and CEO Felton Thomas Jr. saw his salary rise from \$184,000 to \$220,000 after signing a new employment agreement at the start of the year. He also received a \$10,000 bonus and a five percent annual pay increase. Eleven top managers have salaries between \$119,000 and \$143,000, according to a report from Fox 8.

Brian, a CPL worker with 22 years of experience, told the WSWs, “Staffing is really bad right now. The situation facing children’s librarians, when you have a dozen kids, and it is a lot for one librarian to handle.

“I don’t think this is a funding issue, either. You can see that we have a budget that has allowed the library to hire new administrative roles, and pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to some of them. It is really that there is no money for the workers.

“Things are different than they were in 2004. There was no social media back then, but now people know about the situation we are facing and the community supports us.”

Local residents denounced the CPL administration over social media after the library’s official twitter

account started posting pro-management “facts” about the conditions facing library workers. One tweet by the library’s account received nearly 100 replies, the vast majority denouncing the use of official CPL social media accounts by management to bolster their position against library workers. Many replies described this as “shameful” and “inappropriate,” threatened to unfollow the account and expressed support for the library workers.

The SEIU and the political establishment are also attempting to direct growing opposition to inequality and support for public services back into the safe channels of the Democratic Party. On January 22, Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders tweeted, “Public libraries are essential to our communities. The workers who provide these vital services deserve adequate staffing and safe working conditions. I’m proud to stand in solidarity with the members of @seiu1199wvkyoh as they fight for a fair contract.”

The following day, another Democratic presidential candidate, former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Pete Buttigieg, tweeted a similar statement. The SEIU 1199 has shared the tweets by Sanders, Buttigieg and another by Ohio Democratic Senator Sandra Williams on social media.

These statements mask the role of the Democratic Party, which like their Republican counterparts have worked to slash wages and transfer funds to the wealthiest segments of society with the full support of the trade unions.

In 2010 Obama issued a two-year wage freeze for roughly 2.1 million federal employees. Despite this, the SEIU nationally became one of his top contributors in the 2012 election, donating almost \$70 million in campaign contributions and advertisements. Over eight years the Obama administration oversaw a rapid growth in inequality, with the wealth of the richest 400 American’s nearly doubling from \$1.27 trillion in 2009 to \$2.34 trillion in 2015.

In Cleveland, four-term Democratic Mayor Frank Jackson has a record of collaborating with Republicans to block even moderate increases in Ohio’s minimum wage. Recently he has worked to conceal details over negotiations to hand over tens of millions of dollars in incentives to Sherwin-Williams Co., a Fortune 500 company that produces paint and building materials, to

keep the company’s headquarters in Cuyahoga County. Sherwin-Williams is currently working to fire and replace around 30 janitors nominally represented by SEIU Local 1.

Despite, or rather because of, Jackson’s record, SEIU 1199 has not made any reference to him on their website since 2017. The SEIU’s attempt to ratify a tentative agreement expresses their concern that a strike of library workers could gain larger support and threaten the Democratic Party establishment.



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