Cook County public sector workers carry out one-day strike for hazard pay and safer working conditions

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Around 1,600 public sector workers in Cook County, whose seat is Chicago, carried out a one-day strike Tuesday to demand hazard pay and safe working conditions during the pandemic. The coronavirus has claimed over 322,000 lives in the United States, including over 7,800 in Cook County.

The workers who have gone on strike are members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73, which is comprised mainly of municipal and other public sector workers in the second-most populous county in the country. Those taking part in the strike included health technicians, service and maintenance workers at Cook County Health, the county's public hospital system, workers in the Cook County Clerk's Office as well as administrative and clerical workers at the Cook County Sheriff's Office.

One of the top demands is hazard pay for all essential frontline workers, as well as an additional $5 per hour for workers directly tasked with caring for COVID-19 patients or working in COVID-19 units. Many of the striking workers, including respiratory therapists and workers tasked with cleaning the Cook County Jail, site of a large COVID-19 outbreak, face a high risk of becoming infected.

Despite this risk, the county has so far only offered any hazard pay to workers in "congregate settings as well as those in hospital settings who were directly responsible for controlling, mitigating, or preventing the impact of COVID-19," according to a spokesman for Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle, who is the county's chief executive as well as the Chair of the Cook County Democratic Party.

Workers at the Sheriff's Office also noted that lieutenants, sergeants and other officers have all been receiving hazard pay. Administrative assistant Amanda Gage-Willis told WGN 9, "We all work in the same office, less than three feet apart and I don't understand how they can say that these three unions get hazard pay and then we don't."

Workers are also demanding that the county to allow them to work remotely when possible and institute basic safety measures such as safe social distancing and adequate personal protective equipment when workers must be present.

The SEIU is also calling for the rehiring of 48 workers as contract tracers as well an extension of seniority across different county agencies. Those workers' positions were eliminated by the recent merger of the County Clerk's Office with that of the Recorder of Deeds.

However, the union has allowed conditions to deteriorate even as the county has refused to negotiate for nearly three months. The real aim of the SEIU in calling the one-day strike is to allow workers to blow off steam before sending them back to work with none of their demands having been met.

In spite of bluster from union leadership, the SEIU is groveling at the feet of Preckwinkle, on whose recent mayoral bid the union spent $2 million. Preckwinkle is a reliable servant of the ruling class and a long-time fixture in Chicago politics. Having played a role in the rise of Barack Obama through the Democratic Party establishment, she has since constructed a solid record of cost-cutting in her role as county board president.

When running for mayor in the 2019 election, she even boasted: "In the last 9 years we've made $850 million in cuts. The first obligation of the mayor is to look for efficiencies. That's why I've talked about not

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just tax increment finance reform, but workman's comp reform." Among the agencies hardest hit by her cuts over the years has been the health system, which saw its budget reduced by 21 percent in 2011 and whose workers are now struggling to obtain basic protections.

For her part, Preckwinkle is seeking to shift the blame onto the backs of workers. "Cook County respects the rights of its employees under their Collective Bargaining Agreements but is deeply disappointed that the union would ask some of its members to strike during a global pandemic," she said in a recent statement.

The way forward for workers is to break through the straitjacket of the SEIU by forming independent rank-and-file safety committees, as autoworkers, teachers and Amazon workers have done throughout the country. These organizations, based on the independent mobilization of the working class in opposition to the capitalist system and the unions which defend it, provide the means for health care workers to join with workers in all industries for a common fight against the herd immunity policies of the corporate oligarchy, who are deliberately allowing workers to become infected. It is only through such an action by workers that the pandemic will be brought under control until the new vaccines can be widely distributed and thousands of lives saved.

For help forming a rank-and-file safety committee, contact *the* World Socialist Web Site *today*.

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