

Cook County SEIU workers remain on strike after other unions conclude sellout agreements

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Chicago-area members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73, comprising around 2,500 public sector workers in Cook County government and its public health system, are entering the second week of a strike for cost of living wage increases, no increases to health care insurance premiums, adequate staffing and pay increases for the hazards brought on by the worsening COVID-19 pandemic.

An update posted on the SEIU Local 73 website reports that during a bargaining session Thursday night, county negotiators offered only half a percent more in pay compared to their last proposal. Union president Dian Palmer said this would amount to around ten cents more per hour in pay and falls short of raises offered to other county workers when “anniversaries” or “steps” are taken into account.

Negotiators representing Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle, who is also the chair of the Cook County Democratic Party, had initially offered a mere 8.5 percent overall over four years, less than the rate of inflation. The county is also attempting to increase worker health insurance costs by 70 to 80 percent.

The contracts with most of the county government workers unions expired at the end of November 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to rage. The county unions, however, are conspiring with other unions, including the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), to deliberately isolate county workers from teachers and other sections of the working class in the Chicago area.

Instead of fighting to expand the strike, SEIU has concentrated on demands that Preckwinkle intervene to settle a deal. This has been echoed by the Chicago City Council’s Democratic Socialist Caucus, which issued a statement on July 1 calling on “Cook County and President Toni Preckwinkle to settle a fair contract with Local 73 today.” This follows a June 30 statement by the Illinois House Progressive Caucus, which urged the county “to

return to the bargaining table and meet the terms agreed to by other bargaining units in the county.”

SEIU members are on strike by themselves after tentative agreements were announced late last month, first with AFSCME Council 31 on June 23, and then with National Nurses Organizing Committee/National Nurses United on June 30 at the Cook County Health and Hospital System.

The Teamsters have also reached a tentative agreement, but no details have been made public. AFSCME Council 31 reported that their agreement with the county was ratified with 98 percent in favor.

While none of these contract details have been made public, reports indicate they appear to have helped Preckwinkle keep wage growth essentially flat over the next four years, leading her to boast about “the favorable state of our finances” in a June 24 statement about the county’s “encouraging” budget forecast. Indeed, the county expects to finish the year with a \$60 million surplus, partly due to a slowdown in hiring.

Despite union claims of a “historic contract agreement,” reports indicate NNU members will receive an across the board raise of just 8.5 percent, even though the health system alone expects to see a \$30.1 million surplus for 2021 fiscal year.

Having failed to secure a written agreement by the county to increase staffing, the union is touting a completely empty verbal commitment by the county to post and fill 300 positions at the county’s public health system, which includes Stroger and Provident hospitals. Given the well-known national and global nursing shortage, it is likely many of these positions will remain unfilled, even with signing bonuses and retention incentives.

Nurses are voting Thursday and Friday on whether to accept their agreement. Even if the nurses vote to accept this agreement, many will be doing so less out of outright support than from a belief that they can win nothing further through the union.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team spoke with Natasha, Laura and Tia, who work as technicians and assistants at the hospital, on the picket lines outside of Stroger Hospital on Chicago's West Side.

Natasha told the WSWS, "I'm a sterile processing tech. We make sure Cook County has sterile equipment to do the surgeries. We also make sure the scopes are clean so they can do endoscopies and colonoscopies."

Laura said, "I assist the surgeons in their surgery, so after the sterile processing techs do their job, the equipment is given to me and I present it to the surgeons. I also assist them in the surgery. We can't work without each other, and the surgeons can't work without us."

Natasha explained the workers' demands. "We want an equal contract. They gave other unions [of Cook County workers] up to a 12 percent increase in wages, and they didn't want to give us more than 4 percent. They also raised our insurance payments, so if you give me a 2 percent wage increase, it's actually a decrease."

Laura said, "Preckwinkle's answer to [our demands for pandemic pay] was basically, 'you're health care workers, you knew what you were getting yourselves into and you had to take care of sick people, so why should you get extra pay?'"

Natasha responded, "That's not the correct response to have. When you say something like that, it's like you're saying that it was OK for someone to come in here with a machine gun and shoot the whole staff because they were in the line of fire. That's what COVID was like—a machine gun waiting to go off."

"We didn't know what was coming down from the operating room [in the beginning of the pandemic], so we had to be careful that we had all of our personal protective equipment (PPE), and half the time we didn't even have the right PPE! We've lost a lot of coworkers because of the pandemic."

Tia, another processing technician, said, "We had to spray down the masks and reuse them, and we were told to wear the same mask for as long as we could."

Another striker explained that workers in environmental services, which had to clean the rooms of COVID-19 patients, were not even given PPE at the beginning of the pandemic. An MRI technician recalled that they were told not to wear masks by hospital management when the pandemic began because they said it would "scare the patients."

The WSWS spoke with a janitor about the working conditions and the betrayals that rank-and-file hospital workers have faced throughout the years under the leadership of the SEIU.

"We're not getting hazard pay ... [Preckwinkle] won't

give it to us as a raise and we've been out of a contract for nine months. She also wants us to pay more for health care. For the past 22 years that I've been here, the SEIU has only gotten us 4 percent raises over four years. The SEIU hasn't had our back in the past. There was no cost of living increase for seven years.

"When Preckwinkle got into office she wanted to privatize the entire janitorial staff. When I started working for the county, we had 1,500 janitors, and now we have 250. One person is doing the job of three people now.

"The SEIU strike pay is \$50 a day. It's better than nothing, but it's money they've been taking out of my pocket for 22 years, and not just me, but everyone who's out here."

Steven, an environmental services worker at Stroger Hospital, told the WSWS, "The working conditions are terrible. We're very understaffed, we worked all through the pandemic, and Toni Preckwinkle refuses to give us a step up (in pay) for the years of service we have.

"It is a political struggle and it's been this way for a long time. It's the same thing up in Massachusetts," he continued, referring to the Saint Vincent nurses who have been in a struggle to break the isolation of their strike by the Massachusetts Nurses Association and Democratic Party. "Preckwinkle is focused on campaign funds and taking money for herself. She doesn't care about us."

When a campaigner told him about the Volvo Trucks strike in Dublin, Virginia and the reasons why workers formed the independent Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee to put forward their demands, he responded, "That's the same for us. No cost of living or anything. Everybody's job is important for the economy, whether you work at a hospital or a factory. I agree with that 100 percent. We should all be striking together."

The WSWS handed out leaflets on the ongoing St. Vincent nurses strike in Massachusetts. Not one health care worker had heard about the strike, neither from their union nor the media. Workers immediately voiced their support. One health care worker said, "Stick with it! We support you! We are fighting the same battle!" Another health care worker said, "I have been working since I was 12 years old, and I am about to retire. I have never been on strike. This is my first. Don't give up. Stay the course and you will be victorious. We're with you."



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