Strike by Cook County and Chicago workers in danger of another SEIU sellout

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The strike by 2,500 public sector workers in the Chicago area is continuing into its third week with no public updates made between the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73 and Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle. The union claimed to be "bargaining into the night" but offered no details.

Striking workers are in direct conflict with the Democratic Party, which has controlled the state of Illinois, Cook County and Chicago for decades, and has implemented austerity policies that have gutted public services and wages of state, county and municipal workers with the support of unions like the SEIU.

Preckwinkle and Cook County officials are offering the county workers an 8.5 percent raise over four years, a paltry figure which would be more than eaten up by inflation. The county also wants to shift up to 80 percent more health care costs on the backs of the striking workers.

Janet, a health care worker, told the WSWS, "I worked hand in hand with COVID-19 patients risking my life and my family." She added, she was on strike because "higher ups think we are not important enough to deserve a raise to cover our health insurance increase. Because we were once called heroes first on scene to now be placed on hold."

SEIU Local 73, which is allied with the Democratic Party, shut down strike pickets over the weekend but resumed Monday morning. The union called for a meeting Saturday evening with SEIU International President Mary Kay Henry. No details of the negotiations have emerged so far despite immense opposition among workers to the austerity contract proposals by the Democratic Party.

Last Tuesday, picketing took place at several locations including the Cook County Jail, Stroger and Provident Hospitals and outside Preckwinkle's office at the county building in downtown Chicago. The same day SEIU called for a stunt march through the Hyde Park neighborhood, where Preckwinkle lives, after issuing a supposed ultimatum to settle the contract within 24 hours on July 5.

Most of those who assembled in Hyde Park have been Preckwinkle's closest political allies. The march included a handful of union bureaucrats, many of whom have a record of imposing sellout contracts on their memberships, and Democratic Party politicians. This included SEIU Local 73 President Dian Palmer, Chicago Teachers Union President Jesse Sharkey and Vice President Stacy Davis Gates, Chicago Federation of Labor Chief of Staff Nora Cay Ryan, SEIU Local 1 President Thomas Balanoff, Illinois State Rep. Lakesia Collins, and Chicago Alderman Byron Sigcho-Lopez, among others.

The two CTU leaders—Sharkey and Davis Gates—played the chief role in betraying the Chicago teachers strike in 2019 and forced teachers back into unsafe classrooms during the height of COVID–19 transmissions during the spring semester. Both fully backed Preckwinkle in her Chicago mayoral run in 2019, providing significant resources to her campaign. Brandon Johnson, a Cook County board commissioner and Preckwinkle's political protégé, is on the paid staff of CTU.

SEIU Local 73 President Dian Palmer and the other well-paid union bureaucrats are fully integrated into the Democratic Party machine in Chicago. In 2019, SEIU Local 73, which claims to represent over 27,000 workers, endorsed Preckwinkle for mayor, as did Local 1 and SEIU Healthcare. Altogether, SEIU gave $3.3 million in campaign contributions to Preckwinkle, a large portion of this coming in the form of campaign canvassers and other staff. In the 2020 election cycle

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alone, the SEIU gave nearly $28 million dollars to Democratic Party campaigns across the country.

Far from organizing a real fight, the closed door "negotiations" between the SEIU and county officials are strategy sessions to discuss how best to sell a rotten agreement to workers.

In a memo from Cook County obtained by *Crain*'s on Wednesday, Preckwinkle's office said its contract offer is "in line with the agreements already reached with the unions representing over 50 percent of the County's unionized employees." This underscores the treacherous character of all the other unions that have imposed agreements with Preckwinkle and isolated the county workers.

A simultaneous one-day strike on June 24 by 900 county nurses was ended quickly by the National Nurses United. Instead of uniting the two sections of workers, their struggles have been isolated from one another.

The SEIU is following a well-worn playbook for betraying workers, including the September 2020 walkout by University of Illinois Chicago nurses and university staff and the November 2020 nursing home strike.

Adam, a building service worker at UIC's hospital system who went on strike last year, expressed his support for the Cook County workers on strike. "The hospital took a while to follow through with their end of the agreement. We also had our parking and health insurance raised, so I guess you can say that's where our raise went. We have the most [health care] deductions compared to the other jobs so after the deductions we take around 60–80 percent of our income. I was taking more income working a part time job with no benefits making minimum wage. Plus, I could've gone on Medicare, so insurance would've been free."

He also spoke out in support of the Cook County workers. "Keep fighting for big change. I think they should hold as long as they can. Their work is crucial. If Cook County hired temps to cover them it's going to cost them more money because these new companies are collecting based on term rather than hourly."

To defeat the SEIU's divide-and-conquer strategy, county workers must mobilize their own independent strength by forming a rank-and-file strike committee, while appealing for support from the entire working class throughout the Chicago area.

Cook County workers are not in this fight alone. At the very same time, a strike wave has continued across the US. Autoworkers have been on strike against Volvo in Dublin, Virginia, since June 7. Alabama miners have been on strike for four months against Warrior Met Coal. Nurses at St. Vincent are striking in Massachusetts. Last week, workers at the Frito-Lay plant in Kansas also went on strike.

Cook County workers must follow the example of the Volvo workers who have formed their own rank-and-file committee and are fighting against attempts by their union, the United Auto Workers, to force through a sellout agreement.

The Socialist Equality Party will do everything in its power to facilitate the organizing of a rank-and-file committee among the Cook County workers. We encourage all workers who agree and want to take up the fight themselves to contact us today.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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