

SEIU ends Cook County workers' strike, admits to concessions

Andy Thompson, Alexander Fangmann
16 July 2021

Late Monday night, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73 announced that it had reached a tentative agreement with the Cook County government, led by Board President and Cook County Democratic Party Chair Toni Preckwinkle, ending an 18-day strike. Workers were not only ordered to return to work the next morning without a vote, but before having the chance to read the agreement, whose details have not even been finalized.

The strike by about 2,000 of Local 73's 2,500 workers in the Chicago metro area was the longest in the local's history. Nearly 1,500 of the workers covered by the agreement work at Cook County Health, including the large Stroger and Provident hospitals, as technicians and service and maintenance workers, while others work for various county departments, including the County Clerk, Sheriff and President's offices. Local 73 workers had previously carried out a one-day strike in late December to protest the lack of hazard pay and unsafe working conditions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but were sent back to work without a contract for six more months.

Despite the length of the strike and the deep frustration of workers who were forced to suffer through the pandemic without proper safety equipment or hazard pay, the tentative agreement did not grant a single advance. Rather, it is a concessions contract, a fact which has more or less been admitted by union leaders, who have had to resort to the crudest sophistries to obscure their own role in carrying out the demands of the ruling class to shut down the strike and accede to the terms handed down by Preckwinkle and the Democrats.

Local 73 President Dian Palmer claimed in a statement that merely going out on strike constituted a win, saying, "Cook County workers showed real

bravery by going out on strike to demand respect from the county. This contract has real wins for workers that they should be proud of as it turns the page on decades of Local 73 members being considered second-class citizens at the county."

However, Palmer later told the press on Tuesday, "All in all we think we did as well as we could with what we were confronted with." She admitted, "We ended up having to pay more over the next four years for healthcare premiums that we did in the last contract, so that was a concession."

Looking to downplay the concession on health care costs, SEIU has been highlighting that the agreement will provide workers with an 8.5 percent pay increase over the next four years. Given the recent announcement by the Bureau of Labor Statistics that inflation in June showed a 5.4 percent year-over-year increase, this agreement will lead to an effective cut in pay, even without considering the increased health care costs or the lost wages from the strike.

Purported provisions for hazard pay for work during the pandemic and the prioritization of seniority in hiring and promotions are likely to be vaguely worded enough or contain sufficient loopholes to render them meaningless.

SEIU agreed to shut down the strike even though the county refused to budge on two key issues for workers—raising the wage floor for the lowest-paid workers and changing annual pay raise steps based on seniority. According to the union press release, those parts of the agreement will be hashed out in arbitration. In other words, workers who will be directly affected by these terms are being asked to vote on the agreement without knowing what they will be getting, even in regard to basic questions such as pay.

Though the SEIU touts the "neutral" panel of

arbitrators that will take up these questions, the reality is that the final decision over the contract will be placed in the hands of the very same state apparatus that workers are in struggle against. Even a quick perusal of the Illinois Labor Relations Board's roster of arbitrators reveals a variety of lawyers specializing in employment law along with a smattering of industrial and labor relations "experts"—in other words, a group of individuals whose fundamental role is to ensure the dictates of the corporations and other employers are secured.

The willingness of the SEIU to agree to arbitration on these matters shows the desperation of the union to end the strike, fearful of the possibility of it expanding and sparking a broader struggle of workers facing stagnating wages, skyrocketing inflation and attacks on health care benefits.

Indeed, Local 73 offered no real strike pay. The only assistance provided to workers was a "hardship fund," through which workers could apply to receive just \$50 per day. To receive this money, workers are required to "complete an application and demonstrate hardship caused as a result of striking" and show up and sign in for daily picket duty. Many of the union's appeals to other workers involved making donations to the hardship fund, approaching it as a question of charity and mutual aid rather than class struggle.

Significantly, Preckwinkle stated that the agreement was basically the same as the county's original offer, and said she was "disappointed" in "our leadership" of SEIU. She said, "This is a deal that was on the table on June 28, essentially the same deal which our other unions got without a strike and lost wages. Basically, our SEIU leadership accepted yesterday the deal that had been on the table for two weeks."

While Preckwinkle has long been portrayed as a progressive and has received enormous financial and political support from unions like the SEIU and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), the reality is that she has been a key player in the Democratic Party's campaign of austerity and cost-cutting, overseeing enormous cuts to county government and the Cook County Health system. In a recent June 24 statement, Preckwinkle even touted the "the favorable state of our finances," as the county budget showed a \$60 million surplus.

The strike raises fundamental lessons for workers,

including the role of the Democratic Party and of the SEIU and other unions. The struggle emerged as part of a broader growth of strikes by workers looking to overturn years of attacks on pay and benefits and the hazardous working conditions during the pandemic, including by St. Vincent nurses in Massachusetts, Warrior Met Coal miners in Alabama, Frito-Lay workers in Kansas, and Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia.

From the beginning, the SEIU was committed to pushing through an agreement acceptable to the Democratic Party, with which it is deeply integrated. Feeling that it could not get a concessionary deal past workers' opposition without calling a strike, the SEIU isolated the walkout, refusing to mobilize its nearly 30,000 members even in the same local, let alone other sections of workers in Chicago and the region.

The SEIU is one of the wealthiest unions in the country. Since 1990, the SEIU has given over \$136 million dollars in direct political donations to the Democratic Party. That number is even higher when considering other forms of support like providing staff for canvassing and phone banking. During Toni Preckwinkle's 2019 Chicago mayoral bid, the SEIU gave more than \$3.3 million. Despite the high-profile support of the SEIU and CTU, current Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot took 74 percent of the vote in an extremely low-turnout runoff election, largely due to Preckwinkle's close association with the policies of the Democratic Party.

Cook County workers should reject this rotten deal in its entirety. The only way forward for workers looking to reverse years of stagnating pay and worsening working conditions is to form a rank-and-file committee, in opposition to the SEIU and the Democratic Party. Such a committee would formulate and fight for demands based on what workers actually need. The WSWS and SEP stand ready to assist workers in carrying this out and in providing a political strategy to link up this struggle with those of other workers around the world.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact