San Diego sanitation workers’ strike ends with sellout contract

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Striking sanitation workers in San Diego returned to work on Tuesday after Teamsters Local 542 reached an agreement with Phoenix-based Republic Services to end a month-long strike which saw trash uncollected throughout Chula Vista and parts of San Diego.

The strike was deliberately isolated from other sanitation workers who were in contract negotiations with Republic Services in at least five other cities in California as well as Seattle, Pittsburgh and New Orleans. The day before San Diego sanitation workers went on strike, sanitation workers in nearby Orange County were forced to end their walkout against Republic Services.

At least 250 sanitation workers were involved in the strike, which began on December 17 following the expiration of the previous contract in November. The workers were demanding better pay and improved working conditions but came far short of that based on the union’s own admission.

In a statement, Rafael Mejia, a sanitation worker and member of Teamsters Local, 542 said, “This contract isn’t everything we deserve, but it’s enough to go back to work and go back to taking care of our communities.”

The contract terms were nearly identical to what Republic previously offered but was rejected by workers. The new contract gives workers $4.90 more an hour over the course of five years. Workers were also offered a $1,000 bonus for returning to work. Union members were reported to have approved the company’s final offer by a margin of 137 to 70.

Pressure was added to end the strike by city officials who declared a public health emergency after dumpsters began overflowing in apartment complexes and neighborhoods. City workers were forced to pick up more than 100,000 pounds of garbage and are still expected to help returning sanitation workers until the end of the week.

Nonunion scabs known as “Blue Crews” were also hired by Republic Services to withstand the strike, but they were not able to pick up trash consistently from businesses and apartment complexes.

While local Democratic officials feigned support for the strike, Republic Services had given campaign contributions to every member of the Chula Vista City Council.

Compounding the isolation of the strike was meager strike pay, which was between $250 and $350 every week, a small fraction of what workers would have made if they kept working, and not nearly enough to keep living in one of the most expensive cities in the whole United States.

While the strikers had support from Republic workers in Seattle, Washington and neighboring cities who held “work stoppages” in solidarity with San Diego, there were no further such actions organized by the Teamsters, despite the fact that the union admitted that Washington state workers made more money, had better health care and higher retirement contributions than Republic workers in San Diego.

The defeat of the sanitation strike should serve as a lesson for workers to break free from the pro-corporate trade unions who at every step of the way sabotaged the struggle for better pay and working conditions. Nothing can be done until workers form their own rank-and-file committees to take their fight out of the hands of the Teamsters and the two-party system.

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