

On eve of contract expiration, thousands of Los Angeles County workers march to demand improved wages, working conditions

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Last Thursday, with their labor contract expiring at midnight, over 2,000 Los Angeles County workers gathered in downtown Los Angeles to protest the county's new proposed contract that further attacked their wages, working conditions and jobs.

The march and rally, called by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 721, included workers in health care, library administration, public works, social services, homelessness outreach and custodial services.

Los Angeles County is the largest urban county in the country with over 10 million residents and encompasses over 4,000 square miles. It employs 100,000 workers and about 55,000 are in SEIU Local 721. The remaining workers are in a number of other unions.

The cost of living in LA is one of the highest in the country with the median price of a homes at \$883,000, making a home unaffordable for most residents. According to the University of Southern California Casden Economics Forecast published in November 2021, LA County has a current average monthly rent of \$2,073, with the average rent predicted to rise to \$2,325 by 2023.

The exorbitant price of housing helps to explain why the county has nearly 70,000 homeless people, the second highest in the country. The price of gasoline in LA is \$6.00 or more per gallon.

County officials have offered workers a 2 percent wage increase in each year of a three-year contract. The Board of Supervisors, the county's governing body that proposed the contract, is comprised of five supervisors, four of whom are Democrats who were elected with the endorsement, political support and financial backing of

SEIU Local 721.

"The 2% raise they're offering is really more like a 4% pay cut, because of the cost of inflation," Andrew Reid, a typist at a Department of Health, told the *Courthouse News* service. "We are the frontline workers. The Board of Supervisors has called us heroes in the past. And we're not really being treated as such."

"We worked long hours throughout the pandemic in crowded settings and were told we were 'healthcare heroes,'" nurse practitioner Cindy Sarami told the *Los Angeles Times*. "Now the county feels it's OK to treat us like zeroes."

As most county services were and continue to be deemed essential during the pandemic, a significant portion of the county's workforce has been decimated by COVID-19, particularly health care workers. According to the Los Angeles County Public Health Department, as of March 22, 2022, a total of 58,974 Los Angeles County healthcare workers and first responders have been confirmed to have contracted COVID-19 and 331 have died from the disease.

To make up for its depleted workforce, the county greatly expanded outsourcing of jobs to private contractors, particularly by hiring "travel nurses." These nurses earn considerably more per day than county nurses but, by receiving no benefits, reduce the overall cost to the county. This practice has now become common and has been extended to most departments, becoming another central issue for county workers.

The union says its members are calling for protections against outsourcing and privatization of union jobs, guaranteed health benefits, additional support for child and elder care, and wages that

increase with inflation and the cost of living in the Los Angeles area.

The union, however, has not made public its contract demands. Instead, SEIU Local 721 used the rally and march to allow workers to safely vent their anger and frustration and to boost the illusion that they can win their demands through impotent appeals to the county, whose leadership the union has helped to place in power.

County workers must place no confidence in SEIU Local 721, which has a long history of supporting and serving as the political accomplices of the Board of Supervisors and the Democratic Party, which controls virtually every level of government in California. While claiming there is no money for adequate salaries and critical social program, the Democrats, like the Republicans, have showered endless tax cuts and incentives on the corporations in Silicon Valley, Hollywood and the oil, aerospace and defense industries. The state is home to 189 billionaires who saw a sharp rise in their wealth due to the bailout of Wall Street and other giveaways.

To achieve a livable wage, protect jobs, and ensure safe working conditions, county workers must form an independent rank-and-file committee to prepare and organize a countywide strike. Such a committee, democratically controlled by the workers themselves, must oppose any attempts to engage in meaningless union-sponsored theatrical demonstrations or “Hollywood strikes,” and all measures that separate the struggles of county workers from the unified power of the working class.

The rank-and-file committee will instead seek the support of all workers, including striking Sacramento educators and Chevron oil workers in Richmond and 47,000 Southern California grocery workers who are in the midst of a similar contract fight, as well as West Coast dock workers whose contract is expiring on June 30, to carry out a unified struggle utilizing the immense power of the working class to meet the needs of all workers.



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