

Los Angeles County workers at crossroads as union pushes concessions contract

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The US West Coast has become a focal point of workers' struggles as multiple strikes and strike authorization votes have taken place across many industries and regions. With the expiration of their contract last Thursday, more than 55,000 Los Angeles County workers have become part of a growing rebellion by workers throughout the US and the greater part of the country to counteract the assault on workers' living standards by the ruling elite.

Recently 5,000 teachers and school service workers struck for eight days in the California state capital of Sacramento. On Monday, 500 oil workers at the Chevron refinery in Richmond, California, will enter their fourth week on strike as the United Steelworkers (USW) works with Chevron to push through an agreement favorable to the company. Additionally, more than 47,000 grocery workers in Southern California were poised to strike against four supermarket chains before the strike was called off by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union.

These struggles are being driven by the rising costs of living as the US/NATO-Russia proxy war in the Ukraine has led to food and fuel shortages and supply chain disruptions throughout the world. Inflation, especially price increases in housing, fuel and food, has become a general feature of nations throughout the world, developing or otherwise.

In the US, the Consumer Price Index increased by 7.9 percent in February 2022 with an 8.6 percent increase in grocery-purchased food items during that same period with a continued rises in food prices throughout the remainder of 2022, according to a March 2022 report by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Other sections of the economy saw even more drastic increases during the same period, with gasoline prices rising by 38 percent while prices of used cars rose by 45 percent.

Prices in the greater Los Angeles region, like those in the West Coast more generally, are among the highest in the country. The average price of a gallon of gas in Los Angeles currently stands at \$5.77 per gallon for regular unleaded gasoline. Average rent in Los Angeles now stands at \$2,545 per month.

Last week, more than 1,000 county workers in downtown Los Angeles to protest against the county's latest proposed concessionary contract. The assembled health care and social service workers, custodians and other county work staff promised to strike if demands for decent wages and benefits were not met. Speaking to *Courthouse News Service* at the protest, Andrew Reid, a typist at a Department of Health Care service center in Lancaster, California, remarked about the paltry sums being offered by the county, "The 2% raise they're offering is really more like a 4% paycut, because of the cost of inflation."

In a preview of what workers can expect in the final agreement, however, SEIU Local 721 released a "salary reopener" tentative agreement to the membership last Monday which members are currently voting on with voting to close on April 18. The Salary Reopener TA makes clear that expected wage increases workers lost in 2021 and 2022 will never be recovered and which, moreover, enshrine the meager 2 percent increases offered by the county with no opposition from the SEIU, causing widespread discontent among workers.

SEIU Local 721 wrote on its website: "The Salary Reopener TA will recover cash that we gave up when we agreed to delay our 2% raises from 2021 to 2022. Members will receive cash payments equivalent to the money they lost by delaying 2021 raises which amounts to 4.77% of your annual salary." The statement continues, "In addition to the cash payout, we are already scheduled to receive two 2% raises for a total of 4.04% (with compounding) both starting in the pay period beginning June 19, 2022."

In other words, the SEIU, which tricked its members into delaying already meager salary increases in 2021, has now taken the retroactive increases off the table altogether in exchange for one-time payments of at best a few thousand dollars per worker. Such maneuvers replacing actual wage increases with lump sum payments are designed to save employers, in this case Los Angeles County, millions of dollars in long-term costs. Additionally, the union is adopting the county's paltry wage increase proposals for the

next two years in the latest tentative agreement.

It must be said at the outset that 2 percent per year is far below the 2021 inflation rate of 7 percent and the current 12-month inflation rate of 7.9 percent. In effect, county workers are in fact being pressured into accepting a massive paycut in one of the most expensive metropolitan areas in the country.

While there is no money to be found for county workers in health care, social services, public works and other critical professions, additional hundreds of millions are always uncovered when it comes time to increase budgets for county police and sheriffs departments. In the last budget in which SEIU workers were asked to forego wage increases, for example, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department received more than \$3.4 billion in funding. This is in spite of the fact that the sheriff's department has become infamous for widespread instances of brutality and is currently the subject of investigations over the alleged presence of at least 18 gangs within the department responsible for dozens of civilian murders.

To put matters bluntly, workers have no chance of meeting their basic demands for decent wages and living standards if their struggle is left in the hands of the SEIU and the trade unions. Furthermore, such betrayals are not limited to the leadership of Local 721.

In December 2020, nurses at Los Robles Regional Medical Center in Thousand Oaks, California, Riverside Community Hospital and West Hills Hospital and Medical Center voted by 92 percent to take strike action. Nonetheless, only a few days before the strike was scheduled to begin, SEIU Local 121 stopped the strike and pushed through an employer-backed contract without showing workers the full text of the agreement.

In exchange for a paltry \$1,000 signing bonus, the SEIU dropped workers' demands for safe patient-staff ratios along with adequate coronavirus protections.

Earlier this week, SEIU Local 1021, which represents support staff at the Sacramento County, California school district, announced, in conjunction with the Sacramento County Teachers Association (SCTA), that it was unilaterally calling off the ongoing strike of school workers as mentioned previously. The school workers were given less than 12 hours' notice before returning back to campus Monday morning. No details were provided of the agreement by the two unions, with one union official telling teachers and support staff simply that they had to "call your representatives" if they were unhappy with the deal.

While details of the agreement were provided by neither the SEIU nor the SCTA, the Sacramento City Unified School District itself released some of them. According to the district, the agreement contained only a 4 percent salary

increase for the 2021-2022 school year, far below the rate of inflation, and a \$1,250 one-time stipend. These amounts, furthermore, barely even cover lost wages from the strike as the SCTA and SEIU did not provide workers with any strike pay whatsoever, even going so far as to open up donation pages for striking workers.

The SEIU also called off a strike in late march at Howard University in Washington D.C. calling workers off the picket line before the 350 adjunct and non-tenure track professors even had a chance to look at the agreement.

Members of SEIU Local 721, along with workers across the Los Angeles and Southern California regions, must draw critical lessons from these experiences. They cannot allow the unions to continue betraying and isolating their struggles. There is a critically urgent need for workers to form their own independent rank-and-file committees so that they can determine their next steps democratically and secure a contract that meets their *needs*, not what the SEIU and the county say they can afford.

Even within the city and county of Los Angeles alone, significant struggles are on the immediate horizon requiring united mass action among workers.

The United Teachers of Los Angeles is also currently in negotiations with the city for their next contract while hundreds of longshoremen in the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles are also slated to have their contracts expire in summer 2022. A determined struggle by Los Angeles County workers refusing to accept sub-inflation wage increases and other concessions would provide an extremely powerful example for the growth of these and hundreds of other struggles.

The immediate task is for workers is to link up these struggles and coordinate them on a socialist and internationalist basis. For information on joining or creating a rank-and-file committee, click here.



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