# Los Angeles County workers vote for strike action

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More than 55,000 Los Angeles County workers voted by 98 percent to approve strike action against the Democratic Party-controlled county government, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 721 announced Friday. The workers provide health care, library administration, public works, social services, homelessness outreach and custodial services. They are opposing outsourcing and privatization of their jobs and demanding guaranteed health benefits, additional child and elder care support and wages keeping pace with inflation.

The vote is the latest sign of rapidly developing movement of within the working class. The vote was announced amid a strike by more than 1,000 agricultural equipment workers at CNH in the Midwest, and after a strike authorization vote by an identical margin by automotive workers at Detroit Diesel. These are being driven, on a world scale, by brutal working conditions, rapid inflation and the disastrous COVID policies imposed on society by the corporate elite.

The state of California in particular is emerging as a major battleground. Yesterday, hundreds of health care workers at Cedars-Sinai Medical Centerlaunched a strike, following last month's strike by more than 5,000 nurses at Stanford Health in Northern California. Thousands of educators in Sacramento went on strike for eight days earlier this year, and Oakland teachers carried out a one day strike late last month. Over the next two months, hundreds of thousands of workers across the region, including 20,000 dockworkers in Los Angeles and along the entire West Coast, have their contracts expire, creating the potential for a broader counteroffensive in defense of jobs and working conditions.

LA County workers have been without a contract since their old one expired on April 1. The day before the expiration, Local 721 had held a march and rally in downtown Los Angeles involving over two thousand workers to protest the County's contract proposals.

The march and rally were organized in response to the County's provocative initial offer of a 2 percent wage increase in each year of a three-year contract. With current inflation at 8.5 percent, this means cuts to real wages of over 18 percent over the life of the contract.

While the workers who attended showed a determination to fight, the SEIU Local 721 called the rally to let workers blow off steam to boost the illusion that they can win their demands through appeals to the Democrats. 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. While claiming there is no money for adequate salaries and critical social program, the Democrats have showered endless tax cuts and incentives on the corporations in Silicon Valley, Hollywood and the oil, aerospace and defense industries.

At the March 31 rally, the union announced that it would call for a strike vote if the County "does not drop the insulting pay proposals it's offered so far."

After weeks of talks behind closed doors, with little or no progress having been made, Local president David Green finally announced the strike ballot on April 20. During last Friday's news conference announcing the vote result, the union did not explain why nearly three weeks had passed before the results of the vote were disclosed.

However, having received an overwhelming mandate for strike action, the SEIU is now doing everything to prevent a strike from taking place. Indeed, in the same

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press conference announcing the strike vote, Green told reporters more talks are scheduled “bright and early Monday morning.” However, in the event that the union is compelled to call a strike, there is no doubt it will seek to shut it down as quickly as possible and force through a sellout, as it did in the recent strike by Sacramento educators.

In anticipation of a possible strike, last week the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approved a motion aimed at hiring strikebreakers. It allows the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services to take steps needed to prevent any interruption in “essential services to some of the county’s most vulnerable residents.”

The County’s scab operation is being directed against health care workers who have been forced to fight the pandemic without adequate resources for more than two years. According to the Los Angeles County Public Health Department, as of March 22, 2022, a total of 58,974 Los Angeles County health care 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, because they receive 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 County intends to use these travel nurses as scabs.

County workers are in a powerful position, but they must begin preparing now to counter not only the attacks by the Los Angeles government but the sabotage of their struggle by the SEIU. This means the formation of a rank-and-file strike committee to demand an immediate strike and rank-and-file control over negotiations, not endless talks behind closed doors or a limited one-day “Hollywood” strike. Workers must turn outward to workers across the region, including nurses, dockworkers, teachers and others, for the broadest possible support and collaboration.

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