

Houston janitors prepared to strike as contract expires

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In Houston, approximately 2,800 janitors authorized strike action in a vote earlier this month. They were prepared to go on strike midnight Tuesday if the Service Employees International Union did not reach an agreement with the cleaning companies; however, even though no deal has been reached, the union is keeping them on the job.

Largely composed of immigrant workers, janitors are among the most exploited layers of the working class. Many of them are refugees who have fled their home countries, socially devastated by US imperialism, in fear for their lives. Once in the United States, they are mercilessly hunted by immigration authorities and denigrated by fascistic politicians as “criminals.”

“We are ready for anything, of course,” said Mercedes Herrera to the *Houston Chronicle*. “These are negotiations, right? So, we’ll see what they say, and, well, everyone is ready. We want something better for all of us.”

“This is a job most people don’t want to do, but most importantly they just want to be valued,” Herrera added in a separate interview with Fox 26 news.

The union has stated its main demand is an increase in starting pay from \$10.75 to \$15 an hour, an amount which would still leave workers struggling to cover expenses such as rent, food and gas, especially given the skyrocketing rate of inflation. The Houston workers’ starting wage under the current contract is lower than their peers in most major cities and some smaller cities. Many janitors are forced to work two or three jobs and depend on food pantries or other community assistance to get by.

A janitor who spoke with local reporters from ABC 13 news said he needed the pay increase to support his family amid the rising cost of living.

“We need that raise because our families need that

money. I think it is a good thing to bring everybody together here to see if we can get that, so it’s very important,” he said.

Workers also stressed that they were forced to work throughout the pandemic, cleaning buildings vacated by white collar workers and putting their own health at risk. Many said they contracted COVID. Many also said they lost fellow workers to the disease.

When they do get sick, many said they can’t afford the premium for the health insurance provided by the companies or to take time off. Under the current contract, a worker with one to four years of service gets one sick day per year while janitors with five or more years of service get two, according to the SEIU.

Meyworkl Perez, a janitor for 15 years, told Houston Public Media, “[They] used to work us every day, every day and you’ve got no life. We need to be respected and make a good salary and lead a better life, you know, to be with our families.”

Janitors’ determination to secure higher wages and better working conditions is part of a growing movement of the working class internationally, which has been fueled by rising prices.

Houston janitors have previously gone on strike twice, in 2006 and 2012. In the first strike, the SEIU demanded a pay raise to just \$8.15 an hour and health insurance. In the second strike, which lasted for a month, janitors’ wages were raised from \$8.35 to only \$9.35 an hour over the course of four years.

Before the midnight expiration of the contract, union leaders announced that if there is “progress”, a strike will not necessarily be called if the midnight deadline passes and negotiations could continue without a walkout by workers. As of Tuesday, SEIU Texas President Elsa Caballero said negotiations were moving slowly due to a disagreement regarding whether the

janitors were being paid enough to counter the rise in inflation. No strike action has been called yet.

This suggests the union is already working behind the scenes to keep workers on the job without a contract. One can be sure, based on the past behavior of union officials, is that even if there is a strike, every effort will be made to isolate the strikers from the rest of the working class, and end the strike as quickly as possible.

Instead of mobilizing support among its other members or in the working class more broadly, however, the SEIU is once again seeking to channel workers' anger behind fruitless appeals to the big business Democratic Party, which the union is closely tied to.

The SEIU invited Democratic Party nominee for Texas governor, Beto O'Rourke, to address a rally of janitors on May 18, where he paid lip service to raising the statewide minimum wage to \$15 an hour, up from the current minimum of \$7.25.

SEIU and sections of the Democratic Party have for years demagogically raised the slogan of "Fight for \$15." Inadequate as it was when it was first put forth roughly a decade ago, the notion that a \$15 an hour constitutes a livable income has become all the more preposterous under the present conditions of surging inflation.

Even this paltry figure, however, has proven to be a bridge too far for the Democratic Party nationally. With the Democrats controlling the White House and both houses of Congress, a \$15 minimum wage was ignominiously dropped from a federal stimulus package in February last year.

The SEIU has a long history of betraying workers, including intensely exploited sections working in food service and health care. This past week, the SEIU announced an agreement for a three-year contract covering 7,000 workers in Los Angeles County, California, which met none of the nurses' demands regarding wages and stressful working conditions.

In April, the union's upper level intervened in negotiations involving nurses in Muskegon, Michigan, to impose a concessionary contract. Also in April, a strike by teachers and other school workers was called off by the SEIU and the Sacramento City Teachers Union after agreeing to a contract with wage increases well below the rate of inflation, ordering teachers and school workers back to work before they had even

voted on the deal.

Janitors in Houston should place no faith in the SEIU. The only way forward for the working class is to create new forms of organizations. The only path forward for workers is the formation of democratic, worker-run rank-and-file committees that can genuinely act in the interests of the workers.



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