

SEIU announces tentative agreement for 2,800 Houston janitors

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3 June 2022

Late Wednesday night, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) announced a tentative agreement for a two-year contract with private facility management companies in Houston, Texas.

The deal was struck the day after the previous contract expired for 2,800 janitors in the city. Workers had voted to authorize strike action and were prepared to strike Tuesday night at midnight, but the SEIU kept them on the job while negotiations were being held behind the scenes. Prior to the contract's expiration, Texas SEIU President Elsa Caballero made it clear a strike would not immediately occur as long as negotiations held up.

Under the previous contract, the starting wage for janitors, drawn largely from immigrants, was starvation rations of only \$10.75 per hour. Workers with between one and four years' experience got only a single sick day every year; workers with more than five years experience received two. That the union could ever have agreed to such terms, which are now below even starting wages for non-union workers at most fast food restaurants in the country (and even less after union dues are deducted), exposes it as little more than a cheap labor contractor.

The union had declared it was pushing for a pay increase to \$15 per hour, as well as more sick days. But after the deal was announced, SEIU officials refused to release any details on the tentative agreement, on the bogus grounds that it had not yet been ratified by its members. In fact, if the union had obtained these demands it would be shouting it from the treetops.

Instead, SEIU Texas President Caballero issued a guarded statement in which she claimed, “[h]appily, after a record marathon negotiation, we were able to reach a tentative agreement that I think addresses many of their concerns.” This strongly suggests that the deal

falls far short even of the modest demands raised by the union. Now the SEIU is forcing a snap vote on janitors this weekend, before they have had adequate time to study it.

But even if the union was able to secure its primary demands in the contract—increasing the starting wage from \$10.75 to \$15.00 an hour and more sick days for workers—this would still leave janitors in financial dire straits, under conditions of skyrocketing inflation concentrated in fuel, food and other necessities.

For years, the SEIU has been at the forefront of a union- and Democratic Party-led campaign to raise the minimum wage to \$15 per hour. The union has falsely presented this as a “living wage” but regularly imposes contracts on workers with even lower wages. Meanwhile, the campaign provides the Democrats with political cover for their own refusal to raise the minimum wage since 2009, even though it has controlled the White House for nine out of the last 13 years.

Instead, Democrats have engaged in various, largely symbolic local initiatives to raise starting pay for public employees to \$15 per hour. Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner, for example, recently mandated a \$15 per hour starting pay for janitors employed by the city. These moves, which increase *starting wages* for tiny subsets of the workforce, are universally and falsely described in the press as a rise in the “minimum wage,” the accepted meaning of which for generations has been the legal minimum covering an entire region.

Janitors, like other workers deemed “essential,” were forced to work throughout the pandemic. They and other housekeeping workers are among the professions that have the highest risk of contracting and dying from COVID-19.

While white collar workers were able to vacate

downtown Houston's offices, janitors put their own health and that of their families at risk. The minimal sick leave under the previous contract, combined with wages which left janitors living from paycheck to paycheck, created strong financial incentives for them to work through exposure and symptoms. Furthermore, the high premium for the health insurance provided by the companies means most workers cannot even afford care when they do become sick.

The record of the SEIU is a long history of betraying workers' struggles only to impose sellout contracts on workers.

When Houston janitors went on strike in 2006, the SEIU demanded a pay raise to \$8.15 an hour. But it ended the month-long strike of 5,300 janitors, which was about 72 percent of janitorial staff in the city, after reaching an agreement that would only increase wages to \$7.75 over three years. Following a second strike in 2012, the SEIU agreed to a contract giving workers a pitiful 25 cent yearly raise for four years.

Less than a week ago, the SEIU reached an agreement for a three-year contract covering 7,000 Los Angeles County nurses which met none of the nurses' demands regarding wages or intolerable working conditions. The contract only offered a mere 12 percent raise over three years, which does not keep up with inflation, and contained nothing to address the crisis in staffing that is afflicting all hospitals due to stress, overwork and poor pay.

In April, the Sacramento City Teachers Association and SEIU called off a strike by teachers and school workers at the last minute, ordering teachers and staff back to work with less than 12 hours' notice before they had even voted on the deal. The deal only provided a 4 percent pay raise for the upcoming year.

Workers cannot leave their struggles under the leadership of the duplicitous trade unions. The only successful path available to workers requires that they establish their own organizations, independent of the corporatist trade unions and both capitalist parties, to link up struggles across the industry and with other workers in the US and internationally.



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