

One-day strike of 11,000 Los Angeles city workers shuts down services

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Eleven thousand city workers in Los Angeles, California, went on a one-day unfair labor practice strike Tuesday. The strike was called by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 721, which, in total, has 96,000 members in Southern California.

While the strike only lasted 24 hours, its effect was felt across Los Angeles, with trash collection halting, and city traffic workers, including those at major transit hubs like Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), leaving their posts. Los Angeles is the second largest city in the United States, with the larger metropolitan area population surpassing 10 million.

The strike expresses the escalating mood of defiance and anger in the working class. Following three years of unprecedented inflation for basic necessities, workers' real take home pay has significantly declined in nearly every country across the world.

"It's just impossible if you want to buy a house here," one Los Angeles city mechanic told the WSWS Tuesday. Currently the average one-bedroom apartment rents for \$2,425 a month.

A growing "hot labor summer," in the words of the corporate media, is underway in response to these conditions.

Within just a month, hundreds of thousands of autoworkers will have their contracts expire, threatening strikes across the auto plants in the Midwest and South. Currently, 340,000 UPS workers are voting on a contract that, when adjusted for inflation, results in a pay cut. If the vote fails, a strike is possible. More than 20,000 dock workers have been working without a contract for over a year due to a no-strike pledge worked out between the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and the Biden administration.

Already, tens of thousands of actors and writers are on strike in the first dual strike of writers and actors since 1960. Many of the workers reside in Los Angeles.

Another 15,000 hotel workers in the metro area have conducted intermittent strikes over the last five weeks. On Saturday, striking hotel workers were attacked by hotel security guards in the wealthy Santa Monica area of Los Angeles.

The widespread solidarity and support amongst workers was evident at a rally for striking city workers Tuesday in downtown Los Angeles. Hundreds of other workers, actors, writers, hotel workers, electrical and port workers came out to support the city workers.

The WSWS spoke to several writers who had come out to support the strike. Matt, a writer 20 years into his career, said, "We can't exist without these [city] workers. Our fight is their fight and vice versa."

He continued, "I think people try to divide workers. They try to pit workers against workers, especially when industrial action is happening, and that's BS. We're all in the same battle, we're all in the same fight."

Steve, a fellow writer, added, "It's all big corporations and private equity firms and the like who are trying to reduce and eliminate us." He said the conditions of the city workers "is emblematic of what is going on across all industries and it's time for the workers to stand up."

The determination of LA city workers to unite in a genuine struggle for better working conditions stood in contrast, however, to the actions of the SEIU Local 791 functionaries.

At the rally Tuesday, which drew about a thousand people, the SEIU leadership promoted a carnival type atmosphere devoid of any discussion and full of empty phrases and chants.

One of the first things David Green, SEIU 721 president, said when he took to the stage was that the strike was "not against our mayor Karen Bass," after which he unsuccessfully tried to gather a round of applause for the mayor.

The statement flies in the face of reality. Workers are

bargaining against the City of Los Angeles, and the head of the city is mayor Karen Bass, a Democrat, who like Eric Garcetti before her, has falsely been presented as a “friend of labor.” In reality, Bass is a friend not of the working class, but of the trade union bureaucracy. Green’s statement exposes the treacherous role he and other union functionaries play in promoting the very politicians that workers are fighting against.

While claiming there is no money for decent wages and public services, the state Democrats have handed over billions in tax cuts to the Silicon Valley tech companies, the Hollywood studios and other corporations. On the federal level, the Democrats have found endless resources to bail out the banks and fund their plans for World War III against Russia and China.

Despite four different speakers for the SEIU taking the stage, none of them raised any issues relating to the details of the contract struggle. SEIU chief of staff Gilda Valdez emphatically stated, “This strike we’re in today, it’s straight up about one thing, respect.” Nothing about the cost of living, temp workers, understaffing, or compensation for the ravages of working throughout the pandemic were raised.

LA city workers have been without a contract for two years. As one city mechanic explained, “they gave us an emergency one-year kind of bonus and tried to keep us down. They were saying, if you guys take this, then we’ll renegotiate during that time... So now we’re already into the negotiation time and they haven’t done it.”

The worker said the emergency contract “wasn’t really a contract. It was a one-year stipulation just to help us get through the year. It wasn’t a contract.”

He also noted that several workers had died of COVID, and that all of them were forced to work in spite of the danger it posed to them and their families.

The SEIU has been extremely tight-lipped about the contract negotiations. Valdez, the chief of staff, told workers at the rally, “you guys should know, we’re coming back to the table next week with a coalition of unions.”

At the rally, workers were told not to speak to the media, and to have all requests for interviews directed to the bureaucracy. Nevertheless, several workers defied the censorship and explained that the central issue for them was both the cost of living and chronic understaffing.

A young tree-trimmer in the city’s street services department explained that a common occurrence in his department were so-called “emergency appointments,” basically on-call temp workers. These workers are not

under the union contract and have become increasingly common. “Because if you don’t have enough people to, you know, fill certain positions, then you’ve got to get them on an emergency basis,” he explained.

City workers should know that just last year the SEIU Local 721 leadership sold out 55,000 LA county workers in a contract that did nothing to protect them against inflation. County workers were given 5.5 percent the first year and 3.25 percent in each of the following two years. Both numbers are insultingly low for inflation in Los Angeles, which has been well above the nationwide rate of 8 percent over the last two years. SEIU officials lauded this raise as “the biggest one-year general salary increase in LA county history,” a statement designed to evade the fact that workers were getting a pay cut due to inflation.

City workers should heed this as a warning. SEIU leaders will try to pass a similar deal. To the extent that SEIU and the city are currently bargaining, it is because the current offer from the city is so poor SEIU knows it will get shot down and risk a prolonged strike.

The allies of Los Angeles city workers are not the union bureaucrats or Democratic Party politicians. Rather, they are the workers throughout the city and beyond. County workers, teachers, actors, writers, hotel, UPS and port workers, everyone is facing the same issues: declining real wages, rising costs, and unions complicit in palming off defeats as victories.

Workers looking for a way to fight should fight to form a rank-and-file committee to transfer power from the union bureaucracies to the workers themselves. This committee should connect together with rank-and-file workers in other industries to unite workers in a common fight against the assault on living standards.



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