

Union bureaucracy cancels strike of San Jose, California city workers

David Levine
15 August 2023

Are you a San Jose city worker? Tell us what you think about the cancellation of the strike. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

The municipal unions in San Jose, California canceled a planned three-day strike at the eleventh hour, announcing a tentative agreement Monday afternoon. More than 4,500 workers had voted by 99 percent to authorize a strike, which had been scheduled to start the following Tuesday.

The members of Municipal Employees' Federation-American Federation of State County & Municipal Employees (MEF-AFSCME) Local 101 and International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers (IFPTE) Local 21 have been working without a contract since their previous contract expired June 30. The workers involved include airport workers, wastewater treatment workers, librarians, emergency dispatchers, planners, animal shelter technicians, veterinarians, engineers, code enforcement officers, recreational leaders and others.

Previously, the unions had proposed an 18 percent wage increase over three years, the restoration of a 5 percent non-pensionable allowance, increased family leave, and "classification equity studies." These studies would have the city investigate a lag (as compared to employees at similar positions in other government agencies) of up to 20 percent in the current wages of various employee classifications, but would not require it to take any steps to correct this.

The tentative agreement announced Tuesday includes a wage increase over three years of between "14.5-15" percent, depending on whether the raise in the third year ends up being 3.5 or 4 percent. It also includes "an increase from 1 to 8 weeks of paid family leave" and unspecified "reinvestment in public services."

No further details of the tentative agreement have

been disclosed. Union officials merely offered a "full summary shared this week, and information about how to vote on whether or not to ratify the TA." However, it is clear from what has been revealed so far that the contract falls below even the modest and inadequate initial wage proposals by the union, which would have done little more than keep pace with inflation in one of the most expensive urban areas in the country.

The union bureaucracy never intended to put up a real fight, but sought to limit any strike action in advance to only three days, while negotiating behind workers' backs and subjecting members to a combination of threats and misinformation.

The conditions for municipal workers are dire. Over 1,000 job positions are currently vacant—largely because workers cannot afford to live in San Jose on the wages being offered. Many city workers currently commute for up to two hours in each direction from cities such as Stockton and Tracy.

Amanda Maulding, a zoo registrar at Happy Hollow Park & Zoo in San Jose, told KPIX News that she was living in a converted van which she sometimes parks outside her place of employment. "I've used up any savings I had. I've used up all the credit I had. If something happens to my bus or to myself, I have no cushion," she told the news agency.

Nick Rovetto, a code enforcement officer (a type of low-ranking government official in California), told San Jose *Spotlight*, "I had coworkers that are homeless and struggling with finding housing that's affordable, some driving hours just to get to work."

Many municipal workers earn less than \$30 per hour. According to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Living Wage Calculator, the minimum living wage for a family of four with two income earners in Santa Clara County would be \$35.96.

According to rentdata.org, fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Santa Clara County is \$2,941, while the median rent is \$3,233.

San Jose Mayor Matt Mahan, a Democrat, complained last week to CBS Bay Area that the city supposedly had no money available to offer its workers any more than a 12 percent, three-year deal. Meanwhile, Democratic members of Congress have committed to spending virtually unlimited sums on US imperialism's various military projects, including the proxy war in Russia, while they reduce payments made to states for social services in connection with the premature termination of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency earlier this year. Meanwhile, six out of California's ten richest billionaires live in Santa Clara County.

The strike would have been the largest of San Jose City workers in decades. However, in secret negotiations, union and city officials were prepared to negotiate which of the workers were "critical employees" and therefore not allowed to strike. This is expected to include emergency services, non-uniformed police station employees, fire and waste collection.

Workers would not have been given strike pay by the unions, although they had organized a token fund for strikers. To receive reimbursement from the fund, workers would have had to pass an application process which would have approved only workers who picketed on all three days of the strike.

According to federal government records, AFSCME had about 1.3 million members in 2022 and \$347.5 million in assets. It spent \$0 on strike benefits. IFPTE Local 21 by itself had over 11,000 members, with \$13.7 million in assets.

The cancellation of the San Jose strike is the latest in a series of sellouts by unions across the United States, and the West Coast in particular. Last week, in Southern California, 11,000 Los Angeles City workers, organized within SEIU Local 721, struck for one day before being sent back to work. 22,000 dockworkers on the US West Coast, including at ports in Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland and San Francisco, have been working for over a year without a contract. The union announced a tentative agreement in June, but only recently sent details of the contract to members and is organizing a rapid vote. The reason for the delay since June was to give the ILWU time to shut down a strike

by its members in British Columbia in Canada.

Workers, however, are determined to fight, as demonstrated by the strike of television and film writers and actors, the first "double strike" in Hollywood in more than a half century.

The unions are deliberately dividing San Jose city workers from county workers. In late July, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 521 announced a tentative agreement with Santa Clara County for about 12,000 workers. The tentative agreement includes a 13 percent wage increase over three years and a \$1,200 one-time signing bonus. The local membership had voted to authorize a strike the previous month.

Public-sector workers at all levels of government, as well as private-sector workers, are facing the same basic issues. They can overcome the treacherous manipulations of the union bureaucracies only by taking the organization of their struggles outside of the framework of the unions, which are tied by a thousand threads to the Democratic Party, and through it, to the state and the ruling capitalist class it serves.

The next steps for San Jose City workers are to reject the union-imposed tentative agreement and carry forward their struggle, including new plans for an indefinite strike. To prepare, they must organize a rank-and-file committee to fight against the betrayals of the union bureaucracy and coordinate their struggles with those of Santa Clara County workers, UPS workers, striking actors and writers, and other public- and private-sector workers throughout the country and internationally.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact