

Thousands of janitorial and nursing home workers strike in Minnesota, while St. Paul teachers union announces tentative agreement

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6 March 2024

On Monday, approximately 4,000 janitors across the Twin Cities in Minnesota began a three-day strike organized by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 26. The janitorial workers, many of them immigrants and deeply exploited, clean office buildings throughout the metro area and are employed by firms such as Marsden Services, ABM Industries and Harvard Services. On Wednesday, SEIU 26 members at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport are also set to strike.

On Tuesday, 1,000 nursing home workers, members of SEIU Healthcare Minnesota and Iowa, also carried out a 24-hour strike across roughly a dozen locations. As is the case throughout the assisted living sector, the workers are paid appallingly low wages and face dangerous levels of understaffing. Workers are often forced to work 20 to 30 days in a row without a day off, and staffing levels are down 25 percent, SEIU Healthcare Minnesota and Iowa President Jamie Gulley told the Minnesota *Star Tribune*.

The strikes in Minnesota are part of a growing wave of opposition in the working class in the US and internationally, as anger mounts against eroding wages and miserable working conditions. Strikes have taken place in recent weeks by teachers in France and Spain, healthcare workers in India and the UK and airline workers in Argentina, among others.

In addition, workers confront the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to sicken, kill or debilitate virtually unabated due to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) rollback of public health measures. Workers in industries requiring a high amount of public interaction—such as service, healthcare and education—have been particularly impacted.

However, the struggles by janitorial workers and educators in Minneapolis and St. Paul are being

deliberately sabotaged and isolated by the trade union apparatuses which claim to speak for them. The SEIU and other union bureaucracies are especially concerned to prevent a united struggle by workers which could galvanize opposition in the working class more broadly and threaten to develop into a political confrontation with the Democratic Party in an election year.

Workers urgently need to form new, democratically controlled organizations—rank-and-file committees—in order to take the conduct of their struggle out of the hands of the SEIU bureaucracy and launch a genuinely united struggle of service workers, educators, transportation workers and others throughout the region.

Over 500 janitors at big box retailers, as well as 2,000 office building security guards, had also been set to begin striking on Monday, but SEIU Local 26 announced tentative agreements for these groups over the past week, weakening the position of each section of its membership. Moreover, the strikes that the SEIU allowed to go ahead have been deliberately limited in advance to just three days for the office janitors and 24 hours for nursing home workers and airport workers, ensuring they have essentially no significant impact on their employers' operations.

In an indication that the extremely limited strikes are intended as a segue to announcing a backroom deal with management, SEIU Local 26 President Greg Nammacher told Minnesota Public Radio, "We hope that this sends a message that we're serious, but we still want to get this done."

Absurdly, SEIU, along with various Democratic Party-aligned "community" organizations, have trumpeted the limited strikes and rallies at the state capitol as part of a "week of action" under the slogan, "What we can win together." For the SEIU bureaucracy, the actions are

being used to promote passage of a “Labor Standards Board” local ordinance. Minneapolis Democratic Mayor Jacob Frey, along with a group of over a dozen city council members, had proposed the formation of such a board as far back as 2022.

The ordinance would entail yet another anti-worker corporatist body, comprising local Democratic Party politicians, “business leaders” and union bureaucrats, designed to promote the fiction of “worker input” on pro-corporate legislation in the region.

Above all, the SEIU apparatus is concerned with maintaining the subordination of its members to the Democratic Party, with which it is intimately intertwined. The SEIU issued its endorsement of Biden’s reelection over a year ago. Along with the other union apparatuses, it is desperately seeking to shore up support for the increasingly discredited Democratic Party, as popular anger builds against the Biden administration for its unconditional support for Israel’s genocidal war against Gaza.

St. Paul teachers union announces tentative agreement, blocking walkout

The efforts to head off a more determined struggle by workers have by no means been confined to the SEIU.

On Tuesday, the St. Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) announced that it had reached a deal with the St. Paul Public Schools system, calling off a strike by 3,700 teachers and educators which had been set to begin on Monday, March 11. St. Paul educators had voted by more than 92 percent to authorize a strike in February, after working since last summer without a contract. Roughly 4,500 teachers and school workers in neighboring Minneapolis have also been kept on the job since July without a contract by the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, which has yet to even schedule a strike vote.

In a clear indication that its contract with the St. Paul school district will be yet another sellout, SPFE officials have already sought to lower workers’ expectations. In comments to the press, Erica Schatzlein, the SPFE’s head negotiator, said, “No one contract campaign can fix all of the things that we need for our students and for our educators.”

The union has stated it will not release any details of the contract to its members until Thursday. In the most recent

publicly reported offer, school district negotiators had proposed an insulting 2-3 percent raise in the first year and a 1.75 percent raise in the second year, an effective wage cut with inflation.

The St. Paul teachers union has yet to publicly announce when the vote on the agreement will be held.

St. Paul school officials, for their part, hailed the deal. “I’m proud of the commitment and the focus that we have all collectively had to be able to get here to a place that is affirming for educators and also provides folks the supports that they need throughout the school day,” said chair of the St. Paul school board, Halla Henderson. St. Paul administrators had previously signaled that major cuts are on the agenda, citing a projected \$108 budget shortfall, driven in significant measure by the Biden administration’s ending of COVID-19 relief funds for the coming school year.

Despite the efforts of the SEIU, SPFE and other union bureaucracies to corral opposition and keep it within safe channels, profound social grievances and a feeling of indignation are continuing to build among workers, driven by the relentless deterioration of living standards.

At a rally held by the SEIU downtown on Monday, a janitor in St. Paul, who asked to be referred to as E, described the issues he and his coworkers were confronting. He told the WSWs, “I’ve been working as a janitor since 2011, and I have only received \$5 in raises since then. These days \$20 an hour is not enough to live, and I’m only making \$18.63 an hour.”

Speaking on the COVID-19 pandemic, he continued, “They wanted to call us essential, but when the time came for us to be treated as essential, we got nothing. A lot of us got really sick with COVID-19 and had to stay home for days, weeks sometimes, but we didn’t get any sick pay. Supposedly the company got a billion dollars in relief, but where did it go?”

“The union didn’t pay us either. They couldn’t tell us where the money went or why we couldn’t have any sick pay.”

When asked about the current state of the pandemic, E added, “Of course now they get to say it’s over, but people still get sick.”



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