

Minneapolis Park Board workers on strike against concessions demanded by Democratic Party

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Workers for the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) began a week-long strike July 4, after seven months of negotiations with the city government. The 240 members of Laborer's International Union of North America (LIUNA) Local 363 are fighting against concessions over safety, healthcare and wages. The strike is the first ever in the history of the city's parks department.

The strike pits the workers against the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, as the state Democratic Party is known. It controls all nine MPRB commissioners, the MPRB superintendent and the mayor, who are seeking to impose the city's economic crisis on the backs of the working class.

The parks department is playing hardball with workers. When negotiations broke off after management issued their "last, best, and final offer," they informed Local 363 that workers will not be able to return to work at the end of their week-long strike without a settled contract, effectively locking workers out unless they accept a concessions-laden deal.

The park board is offering a meager 10.25 percent wage increase over three years—2.75, 4.5 and 3 percent each year of the contract. Workers have backed up their demands for better wages by pointing to the pay disparity between themselves and those in surrounding municipalities.

"The park board gave us data [on wages] that wasn't sourced," Mitch Clendenen, a Local 363 union steward, told the WSW. "Using the market analysis of wages for comparable jobs in the surrounding metro area, we selected the top 20 areas. On the high end, Minneapolis Park Board members were underpaid by \$15 an hour. When you average out these wages, we were underpaid

by \$8 an hour."

Meanwhile, the city granted MPRB superintendent Alfred Bangoura a ten percent wage hike this year alone. He now makes \$210,000 a year.

The systematic underpayment of wages is all the most outrageous because the Trust for Public Land has a number of times ranked the Minneapolis parks system number one among the nation's 100 most populous cities. Currently, their website ranks it number two.

Workers are also up in arms over the healthcare package. "It used to be that city workers had the best healthcare," said Clendenen. "But it's been going steadily downhill. "Right now, most of our members avoid going to the doctor. When I go to the doctor, I get a bill for \$300-\$400."

He continued:

The Park Board has written up members for something they call 'weaponizing safety'. If you bring something up, they don't like that. 'Weaponizing Safety' is actually written into the document.

We've had union members shocked by electrical lines, members cope with hypodermic needles when cleaning out homeless camps, we deal with fecal matter on a daily basis.

On the other hand, the Park Board's counter to our safety language was that if an employee doesn't bring up a safety issue, they will be disciplined. In other words, it's your fault you got hurt, so we're disciplining you now for not bringing it up. We were shocked when they turned to this. Throughout the negotiations

we've been pushed and dismissed. It's sad.

Workers are also opposed to attempts by the Board to undermine seniority in the assignment of jobs. A worker told the WSWS, "Every winter we have something called a winter preference. All the parks come together and union members can choose which ice rinks they want to go to, which buildings they want to work at, and so on. Park Board management wants to take away citywide seniority and limit you to preference inside your district. The city is divided into five districts. There are three Southern districts, a Northeast/Southeast district and North Minneapolis is one district."

The city is attempting to offload a fall in property tax revenues onto the backs of workers. Since the start of the pandemic, Minneapolis, like other cities, has seen property values fall and office complexes left empty or only partially occupied.

Nearly 80 percent of the MPRB's general fund relies on property taxes. "This is a big reality check," said MPRB board president Meg Forney back in February, as the crisis developed. "So heads up everybody," implying major cuts were on the horizon.

There is enormous potential for a broader struggle uniting parks workers with the working class as a whole. Four hundred employees of the city's Public Works department have voted by 99 percent to authorize a strike action.

Educators with the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers have engaged in repeated struggles against the city administration over their living standards and the conditions in the public schools. There are nurses, doctors and other medical personnel who have engaged in multiple strikes.

There are thousands of workers represented by unions under contract with the City of Minneapolis—the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Building Trades, Operating Engineers, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Teamsters, Firefighters, the International Association of Machinists and others.

Currently, 176 wastewater treatment plant workers with the International Union of Operating Engineers at nine facilities across the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan region filed an intent-to-strike notice June

17 after overwhelmingly rejecting the Metropolitan Council's contract offer.

The Minnesota Historical Society has laid off seven workers involved in organizing their union. Workers were given a two-day notice and management demanded they sign away their recall rights should future positions open up.

But workers confront not just a fight against the Democratic Party-led city government, but against their supporters in the trade union officialdom. The union bureaucrats have worked to keep all of these struggles separate from each other and to limit them as much as possible.

This includes LiUNA's calling of a limited strike, rather than an open-ended one, which has resulted in handing the initiative to the parks board. Rather than appealing for support in the working class, Local 363 has simply said they will file an unfair labor practice complaint over the lockout.

But appealing for support from the same government which is lined up against workers will lead nowhere. Instead, workers must mobilize themselves to broaden their struggle. A rank-and-file committee must be organized to directly appeal to workers across the city and the country for a joint struggle.



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