

# Anger grows among striking Minneapolis Parks and Recreation workers: “How are you supposed to make ends meet?”

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The strike by Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board (MPRB) workers in Minnesota continued into its 13th day Tuesday, following a July 10 announcement that the walkout would be extended indefinitely, after initially being proposed for just one week. The strikers are members of the Laborer’s International Union of North America (LIUNA) Local 363, which covers roughly 300 full and part-time workers. Workers voted by a 94 percent margin to strike last month.

The strike is the first in the park system’s 141-year history, an expression of the militancy among park workers and the growth of the class struggle internationally. Workers are demanding substantial improvements to safety, healthcare and wages. The Minneapolis parks system is regularly ranked among the top in the US, while the workers who make it run struggle to afford rent and basic necessities.

## “How are you supposed to make ends meet?”

During picketing on Sunday, a striker with six years working for the MPRB told the WSWS, “I can tell you what my key points are and what I’m interested in getting out of this strike. It’s a fair starting wage for new people to come in.

“Right now, the starting wage is \$18 an hour. I used to do this job with the park board as a summer job while I was a teacher. I quit teaching and did this job for three years and was rewarded with a promotion to full time with a \$3 an hour pay cut. I didn’t appreciate that.

“They also told me I would be off weekends within a year and a half. And they lied to me about that in the interview. Instead I was going to be on weekends for a minimum of five years. I’ve worked on every holiday, except Labor Day for the last two years.

“The park maintenance people in the suburbs surrounding Minneapolis make about \$8-\$10 an hour more than we do. In the forestry department in Minneapolis, our top pay is \$2 an hour less than the starting wage for the St. Paul forestry department. That’s a substantial amount of money.

“Again, for me, the biggest thing is the starting pay for new employees. With the cost of renting an apartment \$1,500 a month,

how are you supposed to make enough for that? I have a wife and two kids. How are you supposed to make ends meet?”

## Democrats accelerate efforts to shut down strike

Closed-door negotiations between LIUNA 363 and MPRB continued into Monday and Tuesday. On Tuesday afternoon, MPRB presented a new “final” offer, demanding it be brought to a vote by Friday, according to local news reports. The proposal would include a 10.25 percent wage increase over three years—an effective cut to real wages given the sharp rise in prices in recent years.

LIUNA 363 negotiators stated they accept the wage proposal, but object to other elements of the offer. LIUNA Business Manager AJ Lange said Tuesday that he was “open” to bringing the contract to a vote but said “the board doesn’t dictate the internal procedures of the union and how we conduct our votes.”

The striking Minneapolis park workers are employed by the state government, placing them in a direct fight against the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, as the state Democratic Party is known in Minnesota. The DFL controls all nine MPRB commissioners, the MPRB superintendent, and the mayor.

The DFL park board has used the fact that property and commercial real estate taxes have fallen as a reason to impose this burden by slashing workers’ living standards. The Democrats’ refrain that there is insufficient money to provide workers a good standard of living and decent working conditions is a lie. The Biden administration and both parties in Congress are squandering tens of billions of dollars on its proxy war in Ukraine, and on arming and funding the Israeli government in its genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza.

There are growing indications that the Democratic Party is accelerating its efforts to shut down the strike and impose an austerity agreement. Democratic officials are particularly concerned to prevent the strike from becoming a catalyst for a broader upsurge of working class struggle, particularly in the midst of the explosive political crisis and instability in the run-up to the 2024 US elections.

Minneapolis Democratic Mayor Jacob Frey is “working with both sides to reach an agreement,” the mayor’s office said. LIUNA 363 officials have repeatedly appealed for Frey—a chief political representative of the Twin Cities corporate interests—to intervene.

Also on Tuesday, the city council passed a toothless resolution “supporting” the striking parks workers, while signaling that the walkout should be brought to an end. Appearing at a joint press conference with LIUNA 363 officials, city councilperson Aurin Chowdhury (whose candidacy was backed by the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America) stated, “We need to push for the end of this strike and that’s through a fair contract so we can return service to our constituents.”

The endless appeals by LIUNA 363 officials to the Democratic Party and the MPRB are a dead end. Any deal emerging from closed-door discussions with the city’s big business political representatives will inevitably be a betrayal of what workers have been striking for.

The most urgent task of workers now is to take the strike into their own hands through the development of rank-and-file committees. An urgent appeal should be made to other workers throughout the Twin Cities and the region to join and expand the walkout.

The arrogance of the MPRB board officers and their outright refusal of workers demands has provoked growing indignation, including at a July 10 MPRB public meeting.

Park Board Superintendent Alfred Bangoura opened the meeting reading from a prepared text declaring he would return to the bargaining table, “but only after 363 leadership allows membership to vote on the last offer.”

The hall erupted with boos and a worker shouted, “We already did! How many votes do you want!”

Pointing to Bangoura, a 10-year veteran park worker took the microphone and said, “He shouldn’t be saying that he knows Local 363 members are telling him that we don’t want to strike. Well? We’re here!”

“And that’s not his call. That’s our call. If he’s got that much power, we’re just slaves then. Because that’s what slavery is... and that’s what you’re all treating us like. And the community won’t stand for it.”

The worker skewered Bangoura about the fact that he pays a mere \$1,300 a month on a \$210,000 salary to live in a large, refurbished 19th century house located on Lyndale Farmstead Park. He compared that to the \$2,000 a month that he has to pay.

“You pay my rent and I’ll pay yours. And I’ll feel better. Because \$1,300 sounds way better than my \$2,000. And you make way, way more than I do.”

### “A general strike—straight across the board”

Asked about the role of the DFL in the park board strike, the parks worker on the pickets Sunday referred back to the 1985-1986 strike by UFCW Local P-9 at the Hormel meatpacking

plant in Austin, Minnesota.

“This is a more peaceful strike as opposed to the Hormel Strike when the Governor [Rudy Perpich-DFL] brought in the National Guard. I was a young man back then. And I felt like the union got squashed there and the workers lost their rights, they lost their working conditions, they lost their pay and they lost their jobs.

“We have the right to strike. Just like anybody else, I need my pay check. But here I am. I’m sticking with these guys. I’m sticking with the people that are fighting for us as opposed to the management people that are fighting against us.

“With that being said, I love this job. I want to continue with it, but I want to see new people coming into the job and having a fair chance in life. You’re not going to get that at \$18 an hour.

“If you unite all the city workers together, that would really shut the city down. People would be aware of how important everybody working together would be; a general strike—straight across the board.”

However, LIUNA and the AFL-CIO have done nothing to mobilize the power of the city’s working class behind the strike and will not do so.

Local 363 has based its campaign on the perspective of pressuring the Democratic Party to compromise. But at the July 10 monthly park board meeting, the commissioners and the superintendent sat stone-faced and unmoved through a raucous meeting of angered strikers. Finally, board president Meg Forney broke in and told strikers, “... I need, as I indicated, to close open time and go about our business,” and the board walked out of the meeting.

The strike can be won, but a new strategy is needed.

A rank-and-file strike committee should be formed by parks workers to open communications with other sections of workers and coordinate their struggles.

Parks workers must turn to and fight to mobilize the power of the entire working class. Strikers should go to the worksites of other city workers, lobby teachers, postal workers, healthcare workers, railroad workers, airport workers, utility workers and construction workers, not only in Minneapolis but throughout the Twin Cities metro region. A special appeal should be made to college students who have been protesting the Biden administration’s support of Israel in carrying out genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza.



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