

Southern California Disneyland workers vote overwhelmingly in favor of strike action

Dan Conway
21 July 2024

Workers at the Disneyland theme park and resort in Anaheim, California voted overwhelmingly Friday to authorize strike action. The workers, who are members of a conglomerate of trade unions known as the Master Services Council, voted by 99 percent in favor of a strike.

A potential walkout could involve up to 14,000 Disneyland employees in the first strike at the theme park and resort since 1984.

Last week's strike vote is part of an upsurge of working class militancy in the US and internationally. This includes the near unanimous strike vote by 33,000 Boeing workers in Washington and Oregon and growing opposition by 28,000 American Airlines flight attendants to a sellout deal reached by their union and backed by the Biden White House.

Disney workers have endured years of poverty level wages and little to no benefits in one of the most expensive areas of the country. Workers are fighting to end punitive attendance policies and to win significant pay raises, including for employees who have worked at the theme park for several years or even decades and still make close to minimum wage. Stronger safety measures are also being sought especially for workers maintaining older attractions including some that have remained largely unchanged since the park first opened in 1955.

A Disneyland employee interviewed by *laist.com*, Hector Ojeda, noted that despite working for Disneyland for more than 25 years, he only makes \$20.50 an hour, slightly above the city of Anaheim's minimum wage for hospitality workers. "People are just fed up," Ojeda said. "We give the magic, you know, and they take all the money."

The agreement covers a host of Disneyland employees, also known as "cast members," including ride operators, store clerks, custodians, candy makers, ticket cashiers, parking attendants, tram drivers and a host of others.

The four unions constituting the Master Services Council are the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers (BCTGM), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Teamsters, and the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW).

Some workers have also been disciplined for wearing union pins on their cast member uniforms, which the company forbade, making this a factor in the strike authorization vote.

While the uniform policy was a clear infringement of workers' free speech rights—the button in question simply showed a sketch of a Mickey Mouse-like hand clenched in a raised fist—the unions eagerly seized upon it as a distraction from the economic issues workers are fighting for.

"We stood up and showed Disney that we won't sit by and allow them to intimidate, surveil and unlawfully discipline cast members for exercising their rights," the council wrote in a recent social media posting. In terms of the actual negotiations, however, the unions have revealed nothing concerning their overall position or strategy to members.

Statements by the company indicate that management is relying on the trade union bureaucracy to either stop a strike or contain and smother it should the unions be unable to prevent one.

"Master Services Council's strike authorization is not unusual as part of a negotiations process," Disney writes, "and we look forward to continuing discussions on at upcoming meetings on Monday, July 22 and Tuesday, July 23."

Negotiations have been ongoing since April. A contract covering 9,000 of the 14,000 members expired on June 16 while a separate contract for the remaining 5,000 workers at Disneyland's California Adventure Park does not expire until September 30. The Master Services Council declined to enter into a contract extension after the June 16 expiration meaning that the union is forcing the majority of its workforce to stay on the job without a contract and is continuing to do so even after the strike authorization vote.

Despite the efforts by the company and the unions to contain opposition the anger of workers is reaching a boiling point. Disney made \$29.697 billion in gross profits in 2023. It has nonetheless pursued massive cost-cutting efforts especially through downsizing and speedup, fueling broad opposition among its 225,000 workers internationally.

The company also seized upon federal interest rate hikes to accelerate its job-cutting campaign. Last year, Disney laid off three percent of its international workforce, cutting some 7,000 jobs. The jobs bloodbath occurred despite Disney making billions in profit. Declining stock values, however, put gigantic dividend payouts at risk for wealthy shareholders, leading to the jobs massacre.

While Disney CEO Bob Iger pulled in \$31.6 million last year, workers face intolerable work conditions and extremely low pay after years of sellout contracts signed by the unions.

A study by Occidental College released in 2018 titled “Working for the Mouse” surveyed 5,000 Disneyland cast members, nearly all of whom revealed themselves to be living in startling levels of social distress.

Eleven percent of Disneyland employees in the study reported experiencing homelessness within the previous two years. Sixty-eight percent said they were food insecure and 73 percent said they did not earn enough for basic living expenses. Many also found it extremely difficult to take on second jobs as Disneyland changes workers’ schedules each week, a move that some of the respondents believed to be deliberate.

More recently an expose by the *BBC* published Friday found similar conditions to those of the 2018 study. Most of the Disneyland workers interviewed revealed they were making only \$20.65 an hour, making the average apartment rent in the Anaheim area (\$2,000 per month), out of reach. Other workers interviewed said they were making even less at \$19.90 an hour, the city of Anaheim’s minimum wage passed in 2018.

According to the living wage calculator built by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a single person would need a minimum of \$30.48 an hour to afford to live near the theme park.

These conditions, or course, are not particular to Disneyland in Southern California. The recent tentative agreement reached at Disney World in Orlando, Florida, for example, revealed extraordinary levels of exploitation among the 45,000-person workforce. It is highly important that Disney workers, especially those at Disneyland, review that contract and the betrayal leading up to. This reveals what the Master Services Council has in store for them if rank-and-file workers don’t take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands.

In the Florida agreement, base pay was only increased from a mere \$15 to \$18 per hour with subsequent annual pay raises of 40 cents a year throughout the life of the contract. The average rent in Orlando is similarly expensive at \$1,902 a month.

Over the last year, workers have launched a series of

strikes in Southern California, where skyrocketing housing, fuel and other living costs have eaten away paychecks. Most recently, 600 workers went on strike against the grocery store chain Smart and Final.

This followed an historic strike by 30,000 workers at the University of California system to defend the right of academic workers and students to protest the US-Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people. The latter months of 2023 also saw massive strikes of Southern California hotel workers along with the largest strikes of actors, writers and other entertainment workers in US history.

In each case, the rank and file was determined to see their struggles through to the end, but were ultimately isolated and betrayed by the union bureaucracies. The union apparatus, which is tied to the Biden administration and the Democratic Party, is determined to prevent the outbreak of strikes, particular as the US elections approach, because this would quickly demonstrate the pro-corporate character of the Democrats. Earlier this month, Biden called the AFL-CIO his “domestic NATO,” making it clear that he relied on the union bureaucracy to back his wars abroad and the war on the working class at home.

Lessons from these earlier strikes must be learned, including, above all, the need for workers to form rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves to fight for their demands. These committees must unite with other Disney workers in the US and globally, and other sections of the working class, including Hollywood workers, teachers, hospital workers and many others.

Only through such an effort can workers create the fighting organizations needed to take on transnational corporate behemoths such as Disney and to fight for what workers’ actually need, and not what the multi-billion dollar companies and their union “partners” claim they can afford.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact