

“How are we going to survive? How are we going to eat?”

Union officials call off strike of 34,000 New York City doormen, porters and maintenance workers

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On Friday, union officials abruptly cancelled what would have been a major strike of 34,000 doormen, porters and maintenance workers in New York City. The deal between 32BJ SEIU (Service Employees International Union) and the Realty Advisory Board (RAB), which represents the landlords, was decided without any vote by the membership on whether to call off the strike.

Only two days earlier, around 10,000 residential building workers had rallied in Manhattan’s Upper East Side. The rally was a forceful demonstration of the workers’ willingness to wage what would have been the first strike of New York’s building workers since 1991. More than 550,000 residents live in the buildings that would have been affected.

The 32BJ bureaucracy’s abrupt about-face is an effort to prevent a struggle and appease the landlords. In a statement released on Friday, 32BJ SEIU President Manny Pastreich said that the union had “found a common path forward with the RAB.” This comment is unintentionally revealing. The RAB “wanted to have labor peace,” its president and CEO Howard Rothschild told *Bloomberg*.

This was the second major strike called off last week. Early Tuesday morning, education unions called off a city-wide strike in Los Angeles schools after negotiating inadequate deals that pave the way for planned budget cuts.

This underscores the fact that workers confront not only a ruthless corporate America and its two parties, but a trade union bureaucracy which functions as a labor police force. The better the conditions for class struggle—major strikes in America’s two largest cities would have had a galvanizing impact on workers across the country—the more open their efforts at sabotage. Workers must prepare new channels of struggle by forming independent rank-and-file committees, to impose their democratic will and give themselves genuine agency.

In New York City, wage increases would total just \$1 per hour for the first two years of the new contract and \$1.25 per hour for the last two years. The average annual salary would rise to \$71,000 by 2030. But in the boroughs of Manhattan and Queens, this salary is thousands of dollars short of a 2026 living wage—even for a single adult with no children—according to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Living Wage Calculator. It will be even worse by the end of the contract.

The agreement would enable new workers to reach the top pay rate more quickly by taking technical classes. These classes are financed by the 32BJ Training Fund, a joint labor-management partnership funded by the RAB. This fund embodies the organizational and financial ties between top union officials and the landlords. The fund itself is a large entity that requires paid administrative positions and gives union officials significant control over the allocation of resources. Moreover, full-time training positions tend to be doled out as rewards for faithful service to the union bureaucracy.

Workers’ health benefits would not change under the tentative agreement. The agreement does not require workers to contribute to the health insurance premium, as the RAB had originally demanded. But it allows the RAB to contribute far less to a healthcare fund for one month per year. The owners would save about \$2,000 per employee for that month, yielding a total savings of \$68 million per year. Over the life of the four-year contract, the RAB would thus save \$272 million.

Under the tentative agreement, monthly pension checks for future retirees would increase by 15 percent.

“I’m disappointed in the raise we’re getting,” a worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* under condition of anonymity outside the emergency 32BJ meeting Friday. “I think we could have gotten a little more, particularly in New

York City.” He added that salaries should be raised and that a better agreement could have been won through a strike. Other workers echoed this assessment.

A Doorman and mail distributor with 24 years said, “We should have gotten more. If this is what we got without a strike, think how much more we can get with a strike. There were 10,000 out on the street for a strike and a decent contract. The sanitation workers said they are not picking up the garbage if we are on strike. UPS workers say they are not delivering packages if we are on strike.”

“They don’t know the amount of work we do,” said another worker. “When we had a snowstorm, we were out there 24 hours—more than 24 hours—making sure that the cooperators and tenants were safe and sound. They forget the pandemic. They’ve got to realize that we’re essential workers. While people were at home, we had to face the public. A lot of union members died, but we were still there to make sure things went well.” He concluded, “I want people to understand that labor in itself should be recognized and respected.”

A worker with 39 years of experience was also critical of the agreement. “I have nine children and 20 grandchildren. I work at three buildings, and it always seems like something is not right. The pay doesn’t keep up with inflation, and pensions used to be higher. Workers didn’t get a better contract.”

Mass rally

During last week’s mass rally, Pastreich physically embraced Mayor Zohran Mamdani, who had come to address the workers. The rally heard a slew of speeches from union and Democratic Party officials with the typical slogans and chants of “solidarity” and that New York City is a “union town.” But it was wholly devoid of a fighting strategy for rank-and-file workers.

Mamdani highlighted the extreme inequality that exists between building workers and wealthy tenants and landlords at the rally, but the self-described socialist had traveled to the White House months before to fawn over Donald Trump and request billions of dollars in funding for new real estate projects. Having campaigned on a platform centering affordability, he is now touting the mere \$40/week increase for low-paid workers as a win.

At the rally, a porter with 13 years’ experience told the WSWS that he could not afford to live in the building where he works. “I thank God I live in a house, but I still can’t afford it. I got to buy food. I got to take care of my family.

It’s tough. I can imagine living in an apartment, and rent keeps going up. How are we going to survive? How are we going to eat?”

Listing his demands, the porter said, “We need better pay. We need better healthcare. We need to lower down these union dues. It keeps going up. Everything keeps going up, and our pay stays down. So, I come here to fight, you know? Fight for our rights. Fight for our healthcare. Fight for more money because we go through it every day.”

“Over the past several years, we have been experiencing an increase in Amazon packages, food deliveries, just in general—overall deliveries coming into the building,” said a worker at a residential building in Gramercy Park. “It’s definitely a problem because it’s a lot more work for us to do and it just makes life stressful for us.” Some workers have reported receiving hundreds of packages every day in their building.

The Gramercy Park worker also denounced the war in Iran. “The war is definitely concerning, and especially the gas prices going up. I know that correlates to the increases in rent. Obviously, to be able to power up the buildings, energy-wise, I can see how costs may go up for the building owners. But at the same time, we will have to [cover] some of those costs. Certain things like transportation and just to buy certain goods, because all that would be affected with this war.”

He also spoke about how building workers were deemed essential during the COVID-19 lockdown. “We had to report to work no matter what, and that’s another thing where I have seen people during the pandemic that were allowed to work from home, but that wasn’t the case with us. We had to be there, we had to risk our health, our family’s health, and that should be taken into consideration as well.”

Workers must reject this tentative agreement and fight for a living wage and better working conditions. Such a fight can only be carried out independently of the union leadership. It will require the workers to form rank-and-file committees under their direct and democratic control. These committees will enable the workers to mobilize their considerable strength and appeal to other workers for support.



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