

Legal services workers strike in New York City

Our reporters
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On Thursday morning, roughly 500 lawyers, paralegals, social workers and administrative workers walked out at Brooklyn Defender Services, launching a strike over pay and working conditions.

The organization provides free legal representation to people in Brooklyn and Queens facing criminal, family, immigration and other civil legal matters. Its workers are members of the Association of Legal Aid Attorneys (ALAA)-UAW Local 2325. The strike pits legal-service workers against an employer whose operations depend heavily on public funding overseen by New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani, injecting a directly political character into the strike.

The walkout is part of an eruption of struggles across New York City's fragmented legal-services sector. Fellow Local 2325 members are currently on strike at Justice in Motion, while workers at the Bronx Defenders and the Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem have authorized walkouts. Bronx Defenders struck last year, as did workers at the Goddard Riverside Law Project, CAMBA Legal Services, and the Urban Justice Center.

At the Legal Aid Society, historically the dominant provider of public defense services in New York City, UAW officials prevented a strike last year by pushing through a grossly inadequate contract while formally leaving the door open for revisiting wage provisions this year.

The strike at Brooklyn Defender Services is a concentrated expression of something objectively significant unfolding across the American working class. The attorneys and support staff who walk picket lines are not the high-earning professionals popularly portrayed; they are workers who have been squeezed by stagnating wages, crushing caseloads and institutional indifference into conditions that differ in degree, not in kind, from those of any other section of the workforce.

What gives the legal services sector strikes added political and social significance is the terrain on which these workers labor. Every day, public defenders confront the wreckage of a social order that criminalizes poverty. Their clients are the same workers and families hammered by evictions, wage theft, police violence, deportations and mass incarceration. When public defenders are compelled to strike over wages that leave them unable to cope with the rising cost of living, it reveals the broad character of exploitation. The eruption of class struggle in the legal sector, alongside strikes by nurses and Long Island Rail Road workers in New York City alone just this year, is an indication of a far broader social radicalization taking place well beyond the city limits.

Workers on the picket lines in Brooklyn explained the conditions they are fighting against. "I am an IDP, which is the integrated practice of family and criminal law in courts where they overlap," one

worker told the WSW. "Right now, I have 110 cases. That is too many, but at the peak, which was about a year ago, I had 130 cases. Our contract demands do not include a ceiling for caseloads. We do need more staffing as well, but there is no number for that either in our contract demands. We are just hoping that they will hire more attorneys and staff at all levels.

"Our major issues go across the board, and our treatment, the way they treat us, is one of them. Remote workers need higher salaries. And since about a year ago, they have started tracking us. They have a geo-fence around our buildings to track us, and they have installed them around the courts to track us as well."

Another striking worker said, "It's not a single issue. I feel like it's a whole package of things. Salary is important, health insurance is important, and general work conditions. I work, but I have to live with my family. For the first two years on the job, I couldn't afford to rent my own apartment, so I had to stay at home, which is kind of far from here. I work in the family defense practice, so I don't work on the housing side, but a lot of our clients deal with housing issues all the time. It's all interconnected.

"We're always talking about the city budgets, and the executive director of the Brooklyn Defenders appeared at a city hearing asking for more funding to pay us more. But the initial offers weren't reflecting her ask. She's saying that she wants to give us more money, but the initial offers from our executive director and from management didn't reflect it. It wasn't what's considered a living wage in New York City. So, the city budget is a huge concern. It's hard, but we're hopeful with a new administration, there would be more funding. But it also comes down to whether management wants to actually allocate that funding to the workers.

"A lot of our clients are union workers as well. Talking to them, a lot of them come with the same solidarity of fighting for a lot of the same things: salary, retirement, etc. For example, in our practice, we've worked on [State Central Registry] appeals. It's for people who have indicated cases of child neglect, and we'll appeal them. We work with a lot of paraprofessionals, teachers, things like that, who are unfairly investigated and are looking to appeal those reports so they can work in their fields. They're also looking for fair pay and better treatment."

Asked what she thought about expanding the strike to unite all the struggling workers, she replied, "Yeah, I mean, it would be awesome. I think it is all connected. Even just as the first step for all the legal aid associations to be able to strike at the same time, to show that collective power."

A striking immigration attorney told the WSW, "I currently have 40 clients, but the cases are moving so fast now, especially with the

current administration. Trump has eliminated a lot of important due-process rights. For instance, before Trump, immigrants had three months to prepare for the (final) Individual Hearing. Now, we only get a month.

“What is involved is working with psychiatrists, if they are needed, country-conditioned experts with social workers, paralegals, and other courts, which may have court records relevant to your client. What makes it impossible is that we have to meet with our clients to prepare on these issues. But Homeland Security keeps moving them around. In every case, they move our clients around, so it is difficult to meet regularly with them. Some may be returned to Brooklyn. Some may be sent to Goshen, New York. Goshen is now closing down, and they are going to move out clients to Louisiana, which will be much worse. There are issues with property not being turned over to our clients. One got sent to El Salvador without his wallet. But they told us all his property had been turned over to him.”

A staff attorney at Communities Resist, who was not on strike, was walking the picket line in support. “I work in housing. We organize groups of tenants, and then we sue their landlord for repairs. I’ve been doing that since about August 2023. I’ve come to support Brooklyn Defender Service on their strike because we are one sector across the city. What happens to them is going to happen to all other legal services workers in the city,” he said.

“The problem is that the city funds a bunch of different legal non-profits and they sort of pit them against each other. This is all kind of rooted back to the 1994 legal aid strike that was broken by Giuliani. That was when a kind of different Brooklyn Defender Services was created out of that strike failure.” At the time, Legal Aid Society was alone as the primary legal service provider. Giuliani responded to the strike by canceling contracts with the Legal Aid Society and moved to replace them with essentially scab organizations.

The worker continued, “So, we really only recently, in the last couple years, got union density back up above 90 percent within legal services. And so now that we have a critical mass again in the sector, it’s important to come out for every single one of the pickets and every single one of the strikes and make sure that we’re raising the bar across every service.”

This sentiment for unifying legal service workers in a fight for better pay and working conditions is broadly felt. However, realizing this unity comes up against the machinations of the UAW apparatus, which has been actively working to prevent it. The staggered timing of the contract struggles and the bargaining committee’s actions to sabotage a walkout last year by Legal Aid Society workers, the largest in the sector, amid ongoing strikes, belie all the talk of sectoral unity by union officials.

Meanwhile, the political orientation of the union apparatus is to appeal to Mayor Zohran Mamdani “to personally visit our picket lines and use the city’s funding of these organizations as leverage to directly pressure management to concede to our reasonable demands,” according to a statement adopted by the ALAA-UAW Local 2325 Joint Council. The statement also acknowledges the draconian sweeps of homeless encampments, the overcrowded and inhumane conditions in arraignment courts and the brutal police methods continuing under Mamdani. The statement appeals to the mayor to fire NYPD Commissioner Jessica Tisch and to “fully re-commit to his values as a democratic socialist and supporter of labor.”

The insistence by the UAW on directing workers’ energies toward pressuring the Mamdani administration is a dangerous diversion. Mamdani governs a city whose fiscal framework is dictated by Wall

Street and whose housing stock is controlled by big landlords and real-estate developers. He is presiding over explosive tensions under conditions of growing social inequality, expanding war, and the dismantling of democratic rights. When workers’ demands come into direct conflict with the interests that dominate New York City and the country as a whole—as they inevitably must—a mayor operating within these constraints does not choose the side of workers. He seeks to contain and neutralize their opposition.

Will Lehman, the socialist candidate for UAW president and Mack Trucks worker who has campaigned to transfer power from the union bureaucracy to the rank and file, issued the following statement in support of the striking public defenders:

As a UAW member and Mack Trucks worker, I stand in full solidarity with the striking workers at Brooklyn Defender Services and every legal service worker fighting for a contract across New York City. I am calling on UAW members everywhere to mobilize active, concrete support for this strike. The issues these workers are fighting for are our issues. Wages that cannot keep pace with soaring costs, workloads designed to grind workers down, employers who track your movements and treat you as a resource to be managed rather than a human being. This is the common experience of the working class. And the clients these workers defend, people facing deportation, criminalized for being poor, trapped in a system of mass incarceration that functions as a weapon against the entire working class, these are our brothers and sisters too. The deportation machine and the prison system exist to divide, intimidate, and exploit workers. They must be dismantled.

The power to win this fight lies with the workers themselves, not with union officials negotiating behind closed doors or with politicians. I urge legal service workers to fight to expand the strike to every Local 2325 shop and beyond, including appealing to the tens of thousands of transit workers, healthcare workers, and municipal employees who are now or will soon be staring down expired contracts. A unified walkout across the entire sector is the only way to break the isolation that management and the UAW apparatus depend on to wear workers down. To seize the initiative, what is required is to build rank-and-file committees—democratically elected, accountable only to the membership, with full transparency over negotiations and the power to reject any deal that doesn’t meet workers’ needs. That is how we win.



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