

Hundreds of public defender workers in Michigan, New York and Texas strike to defend healthcare benefits and pay

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On July 24, 2026, 230 public defenders, members of Neighborhood Defender Service Union (NDSU)—Association of Legal Advocates and Attorneys struck after failed contract negotiations with their employer, the Neighborhood Defense Service (NDS). The union is affiliated with United Auto Workers Local 2325 and the strike includes attorneys in Detroit, Michigan; Harlem and Bronx, New York; and San Marcos, Texas.

NDS attorneys and social workers represent working-class clients who cannot otherwise afford private counsel in a wide range of legal matters from criminal defense, immigration and housing. More than 80 public defenders are striking in Detroit alone. The strike has stopped work completely at the NDS offices in Michigan, New York and Texas.

NDS management has proposed ending no-cost health insurance benefits for its attorneys over the term of the pending three-year contract, which raised concerns about changes to future healthcare plans upon retirement, shifting the cost of health insurance onto workers. Healthcare is a particularly acute issue for public defenders, given the high stress of the job. Detroit NDS attorney Erin Ruprecht told the *Detroit Free Press*: “I was hospitalized earlier this year after a quick trip to urgent care for strep throat revealed my blood pressure was so high that doctors deemed me an immediate stroke risk.”

The pending contract also proposes an insulting 1% cost-of-living adjustment, which would amount to wage cuts over time, as inflation is currently rising at approximately 3.5%.

Alanna Autler, a staff attorney at NDS in Detroit, said NDS represents half of Wayne County residents who require court-appointed attorneys, and that NDS attorneys act as the *de facto* public defender in Wayne County, with the majority of their work in Detroit. Autler accused NDS of not only stripping the attorneys’ existing healthcare plans, instituting an insufficient cost-of-living adjustment, but also only offering inadequate salary increases.

Shannon Anglero, the deputy executive director of NDS has stated that organizational funding is “tightly constrained,” and that “the cost of healthcare is not going to go down.”

That NDS management pleads poverty is itself an indictment of capitalism. NDS and similar organizations overwhelmingly depend on public funding; their budgets are not determined by the needs of the communities they serve or the workers they employ, but by the fiscal priorities of the capitalist state which finds unlimited resources for police, prisons, imperialist war and bailouts for the financial aristocracy. In the Detroit metro area, billions have been squandered on corporate tax breaks for the Big Three automakers and subsidies for sports stadiums and billionaire real estate tycoons like Dan Gilbert and the Illytch family.

The Wayne County Criminal Justice Center, which opened in late 2024 with 26 courtrooms and a jail and juvenile detention center capable of holding up to 2,500 people, was a boondoggle for Gilbert’s Bedrock development company. The 2018 agreement between Wayne County and Rock Ventures to build the center set the budget at \$533 million, with the county investing \$380 million and Rock covering construction cost overruns. By 2024, costs has reached \$670 million, with the county paying \$502.8 million.

From the beginning, Bedrock oversaw construction in exchange for ownership of the downtown properties the county vacated—the Frank Murphy Hall of Justice, the Greektown jail facilities and a former juvenile detention center—prime downtown real estate transferred to a billionaire developer as part of the arrangement.

The legal profession has undergone a growing proletarianization in recent decades. The “independent legal professional” has increasingly given way to the current reality of legal workers, employed by the state, by a firm, or by a non-profit. They are all subject to the same pressures of cost-cutting, speed-up and job insecurity which defines work across capitalism.

The class character of the strike is not only defined by the positions of the attorneys as workers, but by the populations they serve, which are some of the poorest in the United States. Wayne County has a poverty rate of approximately 22.1%, which surges to 34.5% in Detroit. The Bronx and Harlem have poverty rates of 28.7% and 26.7% respectively. San Marcos, while being a mid-sized city of roughly 70,000 people, has a poverty rate of 26.9%. These areas also have significant immigrant populations and NDS defenders often represent working-class clients in immigration matters directly.

The NDS strike is part of a wider strike action by public defenders. Approximately 500 Brooklyn Defender Services (BDS) workers, along with members of the Association of Legal Advocates and Attorneys—another chapter of UAW Local 2325—also struck on July 16. Last year, workers at the Bronx Defenders, the Goddard Riverside Law Project, CAMBRA Legal Services and the Urban Justice Center also struck.

The UAW bureaucracy quickly shut down the BDS strike after reaching a tentative agreement on July 22, claiming the New York City government has allocated more resources to public defenders.

The UAW apparatus acts not as the representative of workers but as a tool of corporate management and the Democratic Party. It is no accident that UAW Local 2325 resolved the BDS strike two days before the NDS strike was called. UAW officials prevented a similar united strike in New York City last year by pushing through a grossly inadequate contract.

The UAW also endorsed and campaigned for Zohran Mamdani, the Democratic Socialists of America member who was elected mayor based on promises he would address the “affordability crisis” and social inequality in New York City, along with his opposition to the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza. While his election was an expression of the growing radicalization among workers and youth, Mamdani’s chief role has been to contain opposition to the capitalism and smother it within the Democratic Party.

The way forward for public defenders lies in the political independence of the working class from both corporate-controlled parties of austerity, war and repression.

As Will Lehman, the socialist candidate for UAW president and Mack Trucks worker, stated in support of the Brooklyn Defender Services strike:

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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