

Los Angeles janitors end strike

By John Andrews
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On Monday, April 24, Los Angeles janitors ended their three-week strike and approved a contract that provides moderate wage increases, plus a \$500 signing bonus. The wage increases range from \$1.50 to \$1.90 over the next three years, far short of the union's original demands for a \$3.00 raise in the same period.

Starting wages for janitors will now be between \$6.90 to \$7.90 per hour. Under the new contract companies will also pay any increases in health insurance premiums, and, again over the next three years, increase annual sick days from zero to five.

In the 1980's janitors were making as much as \$13 an hour until the maintenance contractors smashed their union and replaced the primarily black workforce with non-union Latin American immigrant workers. Suburban janitors, who have the lowest base wage now and will receive only a 30-cent raise the first year, expressed the most displeasure about the terms of the contract. That the contract represented a win for the companies was immediately made clear by Dick Davis, their chief negotiator, who said it "was within our original parameters."

But the officials of Service Employees International Union Local 1877 called the contract the best any janitors' union nationwide has been able to secure in more than 20 years. They called it a victory for working immigrants everywhere.

"We have achieved our goals of closing the gap between what members make here and what members make in other cities," local President Mike Garcia said after the vote of 1,757 to 91 to ratify. "In three years we will have lifted our members above the federal poverty line."

Despite efforts by local politicians and the media to portray the settlement as a victory for the workers, only 2,000 of the 8,500 strikers showed up to vote on the contract. Double and triple that number attended mass rallies and demonstrations during the early days of the

strike, before the workers became discouraged by the maneuvers of the labor bureaucracy with local and national politicians, clergy and representatives of big business.

Instead of joining their struggle with those of janitors in Chicago, New York and other cities whose contracts were also expiring, the Service Employees International Union settled each agreement separately in an effort to dissipate growing demands for nationwide action.

The scene at SEIU Local 1877 during the vote bordered on the ludicrous. With media all around, union officials hailed the agreement as a victory, while local politicians posed for the cameras with mops and brooms, and a multimillionaire downtown building owner instrumental in ending the strike donned a strike cap. Former California Assembly speaker Antonio Villaraigosa topped it all, claiming that the settlement demonstrates "Latinos can come to this country to work and lift themselves up to reach the middle class." Apparently, the definition of the middle class now includes heads of households making poverty level wages.

The janitors were forced to settle their strike on management's terms not because of any lack of determination on their part, or because they lacked popular support. Throughout the three-week strike workers maintained their solidarity and garnered overwhelming expressions of support from the population. Fear of the janitors' strike developing into a movement of low-wage workers in the heartland of wealth and Hollywood glitter, especially coming on the eve of the Democratic National Convention this summer, pushed behind-the-scenes forces to end the strike short of the workers' goals.

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