

# Los Angeles janitor strike extends to New York City

Janitors across the country are demonstrating, asking for more money and greater job security

By Gary Gentile  
The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Hoisting brooms and mops, thousands of low-income workers are walking picket lines and gearing up for demonstrations across the country to demand higher wages, better job security and "justice for janitors."

The pressure started building last week when hundreds of janitors went on strike in Los Angeles, leaving the companies that clean 70 percent of the county's commercial office space scrambling to find replacements. And the janitors' union says that was just the beginning.

On Sunday, a small group of janitors staged a noisy demonstration in San Diego, shouting "Mucho trabajo, poco dinero" — "Lots of work, little money."

This week, the campaign spreads to New York City, where doormen, porters and maintenance workers plan to march up Park Avenue to promote their demands for contract talks with owners of 3,000 residential buildings. Their strike deadline is April 20.

"It's been the combined disrespect at the workplace and the bargaining table that led us to do this," said Mary Grillo, executive director of Service Employees International Union Local 2028 in San Diego.

Throughout the next few months, maintenance workers, maids and other SEIU members plan demonstrations in Chicago, Cleveland, Seattle and other ma-

janitor cities where contracts expire this year.

In Chicago, 125 janitors planned to begin a hunger strike Monday to protest their lack of health benefits. The contract for janitors in Chicago suburbs expired Sunday; the contract for janitors in the city will expire on Saturday.

The timing is no coincidence. The SEIU set out five years ago to negotiate contracts around the country that would expire within months of each other to combine the clout of more than 100,000 workers.

That kind of thinking, combined with some of the most aggressive bargaining and recruiting tactics in organized labor, has made the 1.3 million-member union one of the fastest-growing and powerful in the country.

In 1985, the then-struggling union started a program called "Justice for Janitors" under the leadership of John Sweeney, who later became president of the AFL-CIO. Organizing efforts were aimed at the fringes of the work force. It spent more money than most unions on organizing, absorbed independent unions, and staged demonstrations to draw public attention and rally union loyalists.

"Their organizing tends to be among marginalized workers," said Gary Chaison, a professor of industrial relations at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. "They also tend to emphasize justice, dignity and respect. Instead of saying, 'We're going to

get you tremendous wage increases,' they say, 'We're going to get you bargaining agreements that will give you your fair share of economic prosperity.'"

That message has attracted thousands of workers.

In the cities where it has locals, the union says it represents up to 90 percent of all service workers. In Washington, D.C., union membership went from 40 percent to 77 percent over the past five years. Over an 18-month period in 1988, the union targeted the Denver suburbs and went from no presence to representing more than 75 percent of the area's service workers, according to union figures.

Workers in Washington blocked the Roosevelt Bridge over the Potomac River in 1996 to call for higher wages for custodial workers.

In Los Angeles, the union became a major force in 1990, when its attempt to organize janitors in the Century City district turned into a bloody confrontation with police. About two dozen demonstrators were injured and 40 were arrested. Soon after, the union won the right to represent workers. June 15 is now celebrated as "Justice for Janitors Day."

The city has about 8,500 janitors who work for 18 cleaning contractors handling most of the commercial properties in Los Angeles. The union wants \$1-an-hour raises for the next three years — the average hourly wage is now \$6.90. Contractors offered a one-year wage freeze, then 40-cent-an-hour raises for two years.

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