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Cook County Spends Millions on Strikebreakers

Chicago, IL - "Our members have put their lives on the line to keep Cook County functioning," said Dian Palmer, President of SEIU Local 73. "How does the County respond? By [hiring out-of-state strikebreakers](#) to come in to do our work."

Cook County has paid to fly in strikebreakers from high-risk COVID-19 states like Georgia, Iowa, Missouri, Texas, South Carolina, and New York, and house them in Chicago hotels. Local 73 estimates that the County has allocated more than one million dollars to hire strikebreakers, money that would be better served providing pandemic pay to essential, frontline workers.

Repeated questions to Cook County management about whether CARES Act funds are being used to hire strikebreakers have gone unanswered.

"Spending CARES Act money on strikebreakers would be reprehensible. Spending general funds on strikebreakers is just as bad. It sends a clear message that the County does not value the work we provide," said Palmer.

"Bringing in strikebreakers from high-risk states has put us, our families, and our patients at risk," said Joyce Klein, Social Work Care Coordinator at Cook County Health. "Our patients in Black and brown communities are being put at further risk. The fact the County continues to refuse to provide pandemic pay to all essential workers is disheartening."

"Last April I contracted COVID," said Tameka Smith, Administrative Assistant in the Records Department at Cook County Corrections. "We

breathe the same air as those in quarantine. We received disinfecting wipes that were cut up sheets soaked in bleach. The only time we know if someone in our office has COVID is when custodians come in to bleach our office. The County has awakened a sleeping giant in the workers and we will not take it anymore.”

“All of SEIU stands in solidarity with our sisters and brothers at local 73,” said Tom Balanoff, President of SEIU Illinois Council and SEIU Local 1. “Cook County essential workers deserve pandemic pay. If they do strike, we will be standing with them on the picket lines.”

“We just had a strike for nursing home workers fighting for pandemic pay and proper PPE,” said Greg Kelley, President of SEIU IL. “We stand in solidarity with Cook County workers. We urge Cook County to do the right thing.”

“Nurses in Cook County are outraged Toni Preckwinkle is willing to bring in strikebreakers and put everyone at risk,” said Marti Smith, Midwest Director of NNU. “We find it reprehensible that the County has pushed these essential workers to this point during a pandemic.”

In the more than two months since SEIU Local 73 has been bargaining the contracts for Cook County workers, management has engaged in the following conduct resulting in multiple unfair labor practice charges being filed:

- Canceled four bargaining sessions and failing to schedule additional bargaining sessions;
- Walked out on County Clerk negotiations refusing to bargain with members who have a legal right to sit at the table;
- Failure to bargain in good faith over the transition of workers from the Recorder of Deeds Office to the Clerk’s Office;
- Failed or refused to respond to requests for information; and
- Unlawfully threatened workers for their legal right to strike.

“We call on County President Toni Preckwinkle to negotiate in good faith to settle our outstanding issues and stop violating our rights by committing unfair labor practices,” said Palmer. “It’s time for the County to respect us, protect us, and pay us!”

Ninety percent of Cook County workers have voted to strike and Local 73 provided legal notice to the County that a strike could happen on or after December 15.

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SEIU Local 73 represents more than 29,000 workers, primarily in public service and publicly funded positions in school districts, municipalities, social service agencies, and many other job classifications in Illinois and Indiana. We are dedicated to improving the lives of workers and their families.