



CHICAGO NEWS CITY HALL

Chicago Park District union workers authorize strike

SEIU Local 73 members seek pay raises, more hiring and health benefits and have called on Mayor Brandon Johnson to intervene.
By Jessica Ma | Mar 26, 2024, 5:06pm CDT

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SEIU Local 73 members rally at City Hall Tuesday. Park district workers are seeking a higher wage and health benefits for every worker. | Pat Nabong/Sun-Times

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Chicago Park District union workers overwhelmingly voted to authorize a strike after more than nine months of contract negotiations.

SEIU Local 73, which represents more than 2,200 park district workers, seeks competitive pay increases, a \$20 hourly minimum wage, health insurance for every worker and more full-time positions.

Sean Ortiz, a park district supervisor, said competitive pay increases and rewarding longevity are needed to reverse a declining workforce.

“We have to live in the city to be able to work in the park district, and we're not getting enough pay to be able to live here,” Ortiz said.

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In a news release, the union cited decreased park programming and almost 500 vacant positions, which it attributed to low wages.

“Over the last five years Chicagoans have seen a decline in park programming since the cancellation of swim lessons for summer camp kids, 30% fewer activities available to our communities, and a 50% increase in waitlists to join programs,” the release said.

In a statement, the park district said its programming and available workforce is limited due to safety protocols during the pandemic. But as programming returned, the park district limited swim class sizes “in the interest of public safety” and to ensure “better quality instruction,” after implementing American Red Cross water safety instruction standards, the statement said.

Park district union workers and supporters called on Mayor Brandon Johnson to intervene with negotiations, rallying outside City Hall to deliver the petition.

“We've come to put this at the foot of the mayor. He needs to talk to these folks and get them negotiating so that we can get a fair contract,” said Dian Palmer, president of SEIU Local 73.

The park district said it “continues to engage SEIU to negotiate in good faith.”

“We have taken great strides over the last several years to create a supportive workplace culture for our team and park users,” the statement said.

After authorizing the strike, the union still has to agree on a date and duration. Negotiations with management will continue over the next few days.

“Hopefully, our action brings some action on the park district management, so they come to the table ready to work with us,” Ortiz said.