

Politics

Union ramps up pressure on Johnson to avoid a Park District strike

By Justin Laurence



Credit: Justin Laurence

Chicago Park District workers protest today inside City Hall.

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Chicago Park District workers protested briefly March 26 inside City Hall, ramping up pressure on Mayor Brandon Johnson to intervene in their contract negotiations amid a strike threat.

Members of Service Employees International Union Local 73, which represents more than 2,200 Park District employees, including lifeguards, landscapers, teachers and janitors, have already authorized a strike and sought to ramp up pressure as they head into a bargaining session March 27.

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Escalating the contract complaints to Johnson raises the political pressure on the mayor to avert a strike. Chicago's mayor appoints the district's board and superintendent. Johnson has left Superintendent Rosa Escareno, [who was appointed](#) by former Mayor Lori Lightfoot, in charge of the district.

"In the last five years, we have seen a 30% decrease in the number of programs offered at Chicago Parks. Why have we seen this decline? The fact is low wages and inadequate benefits are driving the staffing crisis in our parks," Dian Palmer, president of SEIU Local 73, said in a statement after the rally.

After a press conference cut short by rain, hundreds of workers marched inside City Hall and rallied in the lobby ahead of delivering a petition to Johnson to intervene in negotiations. Chicago police officers blocked the workers from reaching elevators that could have allowed them to protest outside Johnson's fifth-floor office.

Palmer told reporters she is not disappointed that Johnson, a former Chicago Teachers Union organizer elected with the staunch backing of the CTU and SEIU, hasn't already intervened in the contract dispute, which has been unsettled during his first 10 months in office.

"The mayor has employees that come out and negotiate contracts," she said. "We've been working with those folks . . . we want to now talk to the mayor about getting this contract done."

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The workers are demanding increased pay, with a \$20 minimum starting wage, additional full time positions and other benefits, including health insurance for all employees.

The district has been dogged by staffing shortages and a cutback in programming for years, including temporarily closing indoor pools last summer so Chicago beaches had adequate numbers of lifeguards, [according to Block Club Chicago](#).

In a written statement, spokeswoman for the Park District said the district "values its workforce and the work they perform daily to support our parks and the children and families that rely on our services."

"The Park District continues to engage SEIU to negotiate in good faith with the goal of a successor contract that meets the needs and interests of our dedicated employees and the Park District as well as residents and Chicago taxpayers as a whole," the statement continued. "We have taken great strides over the last several years to create a supportive workplace culture for our team and park users. We look forward to continuing good faith negotiations and arriving at an agreement in the very near future."

The district also pointed to recent recruitment pushes to hire more workers and said they implemented new benefits in 2022 that included eight weeks of paid parental leave and an additional paid holiday.

The mayor's office did not respond to a request for comment.



By Justin Laurence

Justin Laurence is a reporter for Crain's Chicago Business covering politics and policy from City Hall to Springfield. Prior to joining Crain's in 2022 he covered city politics, development and cannabis as a freelance reporter.