

Justice for Janitors fighting big tech, big banks for a fair contract

written by Scott Scheffer
August 29, 2021



Union janitors marched in six different locations throughout California on Aug. 15.
SLL photo: Scott Scheffer

Thousands of janitors across California have taken to the streets to fight for a fair union contract. On June 15, hundreds of janitors held a commemorative march in downtown Los Angeles. The action marked the 31st anniversary of [a brutal and unprovoked 1990 police attack](#) on a striking janitorial workers' protest in the posh Century City area of LA.

At the time, LAPD cops simply waded into the peaceful march beating people. One woman worker was pregnant and miscarried. Some workers were hospitalized. The outrage over the attack helped bring about a solid contract settlement and built sympathy and solidarity for Justice for Janitors as the United Service Workers West's (USWW) campaign came to be called.

The commemoration in June of that 1990 attack was also to announce new negotiations for a fair contract. Still without a contract, union janitors marched in six different locations throughout California on Aug. 15, including the pictured march of 800 through the streets of Hollywood. Negotiations for a new contract began in early 2020, but were cut short at the height of COVID-19 in March 2020. An extension of the union contract was put in place, which expires on Aug. 31.

USWW represents some 40,000 janitors, airport staff, security guards and workers in the entertainment industry. The Justice for Janitors division voted Aug. 20 to approve a strike if a fair contract is not wrested from management in September.

The president of USWW, David Huerta, spoke with Struggle-La Lucha by phone about Justice for Janitors and the current negotiations.

Struggle-La Lucha: Good morning David. I want to ask how the negotiations are going, and I noticed signs at the Hollywood march addressing a number of different employers. Who is it that you negotiate with?

David Huerta: We have a "master contract" with multiple employers. The union

bargains with a number of real estate management companies, but the real power behind the scenes are some of the biggest tech firms, law firms, biotech companies, entertainment industry giants throughout California, including Facebook, Google, Apple, Visa and others. They're the ones who really control the purse strings.

SLL: During the march, one worker explained to me that you have been working with an expired contract. When did it expire and what protections have you had in the meantime?

David Huerta: At the time that the last contract expired we negotiated and won guarantees of some pandemic protective measures — protective equipment, a 50 cent wage increase across the board, a guarantee that laid-off staff have a right to return to work up to 2 years later, and quarantine pay.

We set aside other issues and got an extension of the contract. Much of what we bargained for were included in federal acts passed by the White House, but you've seen that a lot of workers without unions didn't get those benefits. We insisted on them following up and we also worked to get our workers vaccinated right away.

The pandemic has exposed a lot of holes from the last 20 or 30 years. The Great Recession did a lot of damage to workers, too. Pensions — we have to rebuild pensions in this country. We have to continue the fight for good health care. Paid time off, too.

Yes, there are the economics we all think about. The GDP is up 6.5%, and there is inflation. Corporations got loans and money from the CARES Act and other federal actions.

Our workers continued to sacrifice throughout the pandemic, there were infections, and even some deaths, and without our people they couldn't have kept operating. Even though we were called "essential workers," 14,000 of the jobs for our people

were impacted by the pandemic. Now, we're back in negotiating and I can tell you, 3% won't be enough.

SLL: How bad were the covid infections among your members?

David Huerta: Watt Plaza in Century City was closed for a time because of mass infections. Several of our people got sick. One man spread covid to his wife, who passed away. There were others too. Fortunately, deaths were minimized because we worked to vaccinate 8,000 of our members as soon as vaccines were available.

United Healthcare Workers, another division of SEIU, helped get that done. But our people in Janitors for Justice are mostly immigrants. So many live in crowded living conditions, use mass transit and are less able to take time off work.

SLL: So the fact that your membership didn't have awful death numbers and massive infection numbers shows the power and protection of union membership. Can you talk a little more about the membership of USWW?

David Huerta: Gladly. Before getting unionized, thousands of janitors in California and elsewhere were traditionally African American workers. Then a shift came in the 1980s, with a wave of immigration. Immigrants coming here from Mexico and Latin America fulfilled janitorial jobs and the African American former janitorial workers shifted to security guard jobs. We helped to make that shift happen and organized and now represent the security guards in another division called Stand with Security as well as the janitorial workers in Janitors for Justice. These are all workers who have been the lowest paid, most vulnerable. Immigrants come here to try to find a better life, leaving deep poverty behind, and they fight for a better life here. They face all kinds of discrimination. This is my motivation to do the job that I do. All of our staff, we see these people — the salt of the earth — work so hard and fight so hard for their families and that is our motivation.

