

DIRTY BUSINESS

Lacking health insurance and tired of working for peanuts, janitors strike against aerospace contrac

By [Bobbi Murray](#)

On Friday, July 8, some 150 striking workers from the Service Employees International Union Local 1877 crowded a picket line at the Boeing facility in El Segundo. The picketers - dressed in purple SEIU T-shirts - sought shade where they could find it. Many had shown up at dawn, and by noon the heat was taking a toll. But when a truck pulled into the long driveway, a current of energy surged through the crowd. Picketers jumped to their feet, waving signs and chanting "Si se puede!" as they crossed back and forth in front of the vehicle, blocking its way.

Just two days before, 700 janitors had voted to strike against the contractors providing cleaning services at Boeing, Raytheon, and Northrup Grumman aerospace facilities.

The truck's driver, a young Latino man, watched from his cab with a bemused expression. Five police cruisers arrived, hanging back while the driver consulted with someone via cell phone. When the conversation was finished, he grinned, backed his rig up, and retreated back down the driveway.

The picketers chanted louder, clapped, and cheered as the truck turned back out onto Imperial Highway. Their energy rejuvenated, the picketers continued singing and chanting as a school bus arrived to deliver them to the next action site. One of the women grabbed a bullhorn and leaned out the bus window. "Go and clean out the building, please," she called to onlookers, many of them Boeing employees. "I'll pay you \$6.25. Clean the restrooms, please! But no vacation!" Howls of laughter from her colleagues sounded over the bus engine's thrum.

High morale is a crucial element here, because the strike could prove tough. For one thing, the lines of the conflict are slightly blurred. The most visible target for picket lines are the multibillion-dollar aerospace companies where the janitors work. But the dispute is actually with three cleaning contractors - Aramark Corporation, Somers Building Maintenance Corporation, and Servicon Systems, Inc. - retained by the aerospace giants to maintain their facilities.

There's little doubt that strikers face financial hardship while walking a picket line, even with the modest strike benefits provided by the union. Erica Romero, who has worked the night shift at the Northrup facility in Redondo Beach for the past four years, says she makes \$7.65 an hour, with no paid sick days or health insurance; some of her colleagues make a dollar less an hour.

With her paycheck-to-paycheck existence, she's not sure how long she can stay out on the picket line. But she's adamant that she deserves better than she's been getting. "We're not asking for anything big, just a decent salary, nine or ten dollars an hour. That's just."

Dick Davis, chief negotiator for the three cleaning contractors, says that management has offered a \$2.75-an-hour raise over three years - about ninety cents a year. He says that the profit margins for the cleaning

contracting companies are very thin. "Everybody perceives that their employer is making a ton of money, but that's not true."

The union strategy is to pressure the client aerospace companies, which enjoy lucrative government contracts and hire the subcontractors. "The client companies pit the contractors against each other and the lowest bid gets the work," explains Mike Garcia, president of Local 1877, the janitors' union. The hope is that Boeing, Northrop, and Raytheon officials will sit down at the negotiating table to work out a solution, since, in the union's view, they ultimately hold the purse-strings that could be loosed to provide the janitors a raise.

A Northrup spokesman would only say that it's company policy to not interfere in subcontractors' labor relations; Boeing referred CityBeat to Davis, the negotiator for the cleaning contractors, and Raytheon did not respond to calls at press time.

The union is using an array of tactics to get all parties to the negotiating table. The ongoing actions at the corporate facilities continue, and political pressure may be building as well. The amount of business aerospace companies do with state and federal officials make them vulnerable to a word from those quarters. Garcia has had conversations with U.S. Rep. Jane Harman and state Sen. Alan Lowenthal, whose districts include a lot of aerospace companies, and California Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez is sure to make a few key phone calls.

Davis, speaking for the cleaning subcontractors, thinks that the strike hasn't got as much support as the union claims, saying that the companies know who shows up at work and who doesn't. Union spokeswoman Beth Trimarco counters that picketers come out before their shifts, and may be too intimidated to avoid work. "At any given time there are something like 400 workers out at the actions," says Trimarco.

Porfirio Corona, who was out at last Friday's picket line, wouldn't guess how long the strike will last. Corona, an 11-year employee of the Aramark Corporation, doesn't look forward to going without a paycheck. He usually brings home about \$1,000 monthly. He and his wife are both diabetic; the disease has blinded her, and she's on Medi-Cal. Corona has no health care coverage, and doesn't look well. But, he says, "I'm going to hang in there until the end. I hope the union wins."

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