Standing Together:
Houston Labor Struggles Now and Then

By Isaac Morey

"History repeats itself" goes the old saying. This adage, often repeated to the point of seeming trivial, proves time and time again to be accurate. We see this when we examine the conquests of nations, the conflicts of world power structures, and the rise and fall of empires; but it holds equally true when we examine the "small" bits of history around us. The struggle between labor and management provides an excellent example of this, given the history of significant strikes in Houston.

The year 2012 represented an incredibly historic year for local labor. Thousands of janitors won a new contract after a long summer that saw heated negotiation between management and labor, followed by weeks of strikes and dramatic acts of civil disobedience. These janitors belonged to the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which represents workers in the fields of healthcare, public service, and property service. They were employed by subcontractors, which hire workers to do a specific job for another company (cleaning downtown office buildings, in this case).[1]

The janitors who worked for these companies first won their union contract in 2005. At the time, janitors in the city made an average of $5.25 an hour and were assigned to four hour shifts. Despite these poor working conditions, janitors had difficulty organizing. Separate subcontractors (ABM, GCA, OneSource, Pritchard, and Sanitors) ran cleaning services in thirty-six prominent downtown buildings, thus requiring the unionization effort to transcend individual companies for the janitors to stand together as part of the same union. These companies also initially resisted recognizing the union, an action which sparked strikes. With the help of sympathy strikes in other cities, the workers eventually won a union contract.[2]

This was seen as a major victory for labor in general. The janitors won a $2.50 pay raise over three years, an increase from four hour shifts to six hour shifts, the option of receiving health benefits, and paid vacation time. While these gains represented a personal victory for workers, having prevailed in a heavily anti-union southern city made the victory more remarkable.[3]

In 2012, however, the gains made by labor came under threat. Although wages were elevated to $8.35 an hour and personal benefits won, the contract expiration loomed, and the outcome of negotiations remained uncertain. The union wanted to preserve their benefits and to raise their wages to $10.00 an hour over the next three years. Management wanted slight cuts in benefits and a freeze in wages. Tension mounted, and on May 31, the contract expired.[4]

On July 10, after protests and one-day strikes failed to break the stalemate, workers walked off the job and began what became a five-week strike. This sparked solidarity strikes in Washington, D.C., Minneapolis, Seattle, Boston, San Ramon, Oakland, Los Angeles, and Denver. The national attention that the strike drew cast light on the working conditions of Houston janitors. The *Houston Chronicle* reported that janitorial wages in Houston were among the lowest in the nation, and cited Detroit, Boston, Portland, and Minneapolis as examples of cities whose janitorial wages were well into the double digits.[5]

In addition to low hourly wages, management often restricted workers hours to part-time. These factors combined to set the average yearly wage of a janitor in the

People from all backgrounds and walks of life stood together in protest to support Houston janitors.
Photo courtesy of Service Employees International Union Local 1.

city at a meager $9,000. “It is very difficult to support a family on this wage,” said janitor Adriana Vasquez.[6]

Vasquez works in Houston’s Chase Tower—the tallest building in Texas and home to one of the world’s largest multinational corporations. She cleans bathrooms across ten floors every night, which equals roughly a hundred toilets, in addition to sinks, floors, etc. In a recent interview, Vasquez said that although the work is difficult, she likes her job and is proud of what she does. “What I don’t like, though, is the pressure that is put on us,” she added. “We don’t have enough time to do the job the way it’s supposed to be done. They always expect us to do more with less [time.] We are literally running.” Because of this pressure, Adriana feels a union is important.[7]

Adriana claims, however, that employees who support the union are often targeted by management. Supervisors frequently give these workers more difficult tasks, or even threaten them with an immigration audit. Because most of these janitors are first generation Hispanics, this is certainly a sensitive issue.[8]

Regardless, Vasquez, who lost custody of her children because she could not support them financially, remains vocal in her union support. “The job becomes more and more difficult as hours are cut … and we are not respected.” She continued, “A lot of janitors are elderly—there really is no retirement for them—yet they are not respected or accommodated. Most janitors work at night. They have more work and are paid less than those who work during the day. We are paid poverty wages for a very difficult job.”[9]

The strike wore on for over five weeks. During that time, the janitors and their supporters made frequent use of demonstrations and civil disobedience to draw attention to their cause and pressure the subcontractors to negotiate a deal. July 12 saw roughly four hundred protesters gather near the Galleria, blocking traffic and resulting in an arrest. Police arrested another sixteen during a subsequent protest on July 18 and an additional seven on July 31.

Demonstrations were not aimed at subcontractors alone. Union representative Paloma Martinez explained that the union sought support from the corporations that occupied the buildings its members cleaned. “They don’t want to handle cleaning. No longer do service employees … work directly for [their business,] there is a middleman. But when everyone takes a slice off the top it becomes a race to the bottom.” Martinez added that corporations have enormous sway over how subcontractors deal with unions. The subcontractor, after all, works for the building’s corporate tenants.[10]

Protests throughout July 2012 resulted in arrests.
Photo courtesy of SEIU Local 1.

Adriana Vasquez’s support for the union eventually brought her face to face with Jamie Dimon, CEO of JPMorgan Chase. “I got a call, and they told me ‘pack your bags, you’re going to Washington,’” she recalled enthusiastically. The union recruited Vasquez to publicly confront Dimon during a well-publicized testimony. After learning to ask the question in English, she inquired, “Mr. Dimon, you make billions of dollars every

On the third day of an escalating city-wide strike, workers at nine more buildings walked off the job, doubling the size of the strike. Here, protesters block traffic near the Galleria.
Photo by Laurie Couch, courtesy of SEIU Local 1.

year. Why do you deny the people cleaning your buildings a living wage?" As it turns out, Dimon made in an hour roughly the same as Vasquez and other Houston janitors made in a year.[11]

Vasquez felt that the highlight of the strike happened in Houston. During the final wave of arrests of demonstrators who blocked streets in support of the union, two protesters were "lost" in the Harris county jail. Bail was posted, but the protesters were not released. In response, over five hundred janitors marched to the jail and demanded the release of the "lost" protesters. The jail finally released them later that evening. "Everyone was hugging and crying," recalled Vasquez. "I never thought that I would live through something like that here in the United States."[12]

Although the corporations that rely on subcontractors refused to support the union during negotiations, the union nonetheless won a contract that satisfied workers. On August 11, the union agreed to a one dollar per hour pay raise over the next four years. Though this was not as much as the union hoped for, it was still enough to raise the annual wages of workers above $10,000. It also ensured that janitors kept existing health benefits.[13]

"For me, the contract we won means a lot," said Vasquez. "Although it may not seem like much … for us it is a lot. We didn't lose our health insurance, which is a huge benefit. We kept our right to vacation and holiday pay. Every time we are not paid for a holiday it is less money to feed our children … less money to survive." In another positive sign, the strike united a large population behind the janitors.[14]

As Vasquez put it, "I learned a lot about how different people are. There were all sorts of people – people who didn't speak English, people who didn't speak Spanish, people who spoke other languages – and it was amazing to see the wonderful diversity that existed in solidarity. We might not have understood each other, we might not have known each other, but we were all united in this cause and connected in this cause. Even though we were not all speaking the same languages, we were speaking the same language."[15]

The janitors, as well as those who supported them, represented a diverse bunch, from politicians such as Julie Lee or Mayor Annise Parker, to celebrities like Danny Glover, university students, and other working people. Vasquez noted that significant diversity existed even within the Hispanic community. "We might both speak Spanish; however we come from different cultures. It was a great experience to see everyone come together," she said. "People from all over the country came here, and people got arrested. It was something that I had never seen, and there were such conflicting emotions of anguish and fascination and joy. We were all standing up for something."[16]

Paloma Martinez, a representative for SEIU, explained the significance of this local strike within the context of the world economy. "America is becoming a very service based economy. These are the jobs that cannot be outsourced, and that is why they should be good jobs. … The janitors' aim is not to get rich; it is simply to make a living wage that will allow them to raise a family with prospects. They want their own kids to move on to college, to the middle class. When wages remain stagnant the cycle of poverty continues … the fact that you have to do so much and fight so hard [for a one dollar raise] really says something about the state of the middle class in our country."[17]

Civil rights activist and actor Danny Glover called upon Houston civil rights, faith-based, and elected leaders to establish a task force to protect the First Amendment rights of Houston's janitors. Photo courtesy of SEIU Local 1.

Martinez spoke about the decline of American unions and the effect that this has on the economy. Martinez contends that this trend can be reversed through the battles that workers like Adriana fight.

One of the early mule-drawn streetcars in Houston, circa 1870s. Photo courtesy of the Digital Library, University of Houston Libraries.

These conflicts have existed between labor and management since the beginning of the industrial revolution, and Houston frequently served as the stage for this important aspect of U.S. history. One of the most significant strikes in the city was the streetcar conductor's strike in the summer of 1904. This strike, staged by forty-seven conductors, played an important role both in labor history and in the history of Houston.[18]

In the city's earliest days, transportation options in Houston consisted of walking or taking a horse drawn carriage. The year 1868 marked the first attempt to create an alternative to these methods, when the Houston City Railway company built the first horse drawn passenger rail line designed for use within the city. Although this line quickly died out because of poor location, the city commissioned more lines to be built during the 1870s and 1880s. Houstonians first considered these lines to be interesting novelties rather than reliable means of transportation, but this perception slowly changed, and by the 1890s, streetcars were an important facet of city life.[19]

The growth of a serious commuter rail system helped give rise to neighborhoods placed further away from the heart of the city. As the city grew to include these "streetcar suburbs," it became less pedestrian friendly, thus making streetcars even more important. By the turn of the twentieth century, streetcars were at the peak of their importance in Houston.[20]

When, in 1904, the streetcar conductors went on strike, the personal lives of many Houstonians and the economy of the city depended on the streetcar system. The strike effectively shut down public transportation for the summer, creating chaos for the city.[21]

The open car was used during the hot humid Houston summers to catch a breeze through the car. Shades could be pulled down to keep out rain if necessary. The number of passengers indicated the importance of streetcars to Houston transportation at the time. Photos courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

The prelude to this pandemonium was the seemingly never ending strife between the streetcar workers and management of the Amalgamated Houston Streetcar Company. In the early summer of 1904, the Amalgamated Association of Street Railway Employees filed a complaint against unfair labor practices, alleging that management used intimidation and other union busting tactics, but more importantly that management unfairly fired sixteen workers because these workers supported the union. The judge ruled against the union, which initiated the strike.[22]

This draws interesting parallels with the situation that Adriana Vasquez and other Houston janitors faced over a hundred years after the streetcar strike. For one, intimidation and lack of respect served as the worker's primary reason for striking. Additionally, management attempted to intimidate union supporters through unfair treatment.

Workers followed through with the strike and caused significant mayhem. Other unions supported the conductors financially, and the riding public stood up against the company's attempts to hire replacements, demonstrating the community support for these forty-seven members of the streetcar conductors union.[23]

A group of wealthy investors from Boston owned and controlled the streetcars in Houston. This helped to galvanize the middle and working class of Houston against management because they construed the strife as an attempt by elitist northerners to control the southern population. Houstonians' responses ranged between respectful support of the union to reckless vigilantism against the company.[24]

Unlike the Houston janitors' strike, the streetcar strike had a tendency to turn violent at times. Workers, union members, and even riders tried to prevent scabs from running the streetcars, and scuffles occurred frequently. In a couple of instances, the violence turned from minor street fights to alarmingly dangerous outbreaks. At least twice over the summer, protesters used dynamite on the rails. On another occasion, shots were fired.[25]

Houston City Street Railway on Texas Avenue, late 1890s.

Despite the difference in how resistance was carried out, the similarities between the two strikes remain fascinating. The methods of organizing workers against perceived injustices of management are virtually the same now as they were over a hundred years ago. Reliance on local community and the worker's sense of autonomy remain the cornerstones. Even the methods of drawing attention to the cause (though less violent today) reflect a similar approach. Regardless of circumstance, the past always holds a lesson to teach about the present.

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