

Janitors rally for higher wages

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Dozens of union janitors and their supporters rallied at the Inner Harbor on Wednesday evening to call for higher wages.

The office cleaners, members of the Service Employees International Union, have been negotiating a new contract since Sept. 8 with representatives from major commercial cleaning companies in the region. They have threatened a strike if their demands for higher pay are not met by Oct. 15.

"I have to work two jobs to survive," said Frances Smith, who cleans bathrooms in an office building at 100 E. Pratt Street. "With rent going up, bills and groceries to pay and my grandchildren in college, I'm really struggling."

Wages for the union's more than 700 Baltimore workers range from \$10.90 an hour (\$11,336 annually) for part-time cleaners to \$11.40 an hour (\$23,712 annually) for full-time cleaners.

Baltimore City Councilman William H. Cole IV and Nick Mosby, who defeated Councilwoman Belinda Conaway in the Democratic primary, joined the protesters at the corner of Light and Pratt streets. About 35 "Occupy Baltimore" activists were camped out nearby.

Eric Richardson, a janitor from East Baltimore, carried a yellow union sign. "We're fighting so I can support my family, my grandkids, and so I can send them to college," said Richardson, 51.

The custodians work for companies including Red Coats, American Building Maintenance and Building Maintenance Services. The companies arrange for custodians to clean prominent buildings downtown such as the Candler, Legg Mason and Bank of America buildings.

"They say, 'The economy is bad,'" said the union's area director, Jaime Contreras, talking into a microphone at the rally. "The economy is bad for working people, too. If [the companies] are struggling, imagine how a worker who earns \$11,000 a year is struggling."

Workers passed out fliers showing billionaires' wealth increasing.

"Is that fair?" Contreras asked the crowd.

"No!" people shouted in response.

"We're going to keep fighting until we get a fair contract," Contreras said to applause.

Mosby then took the microphone and pointed his finger at the office buildings surrounding the crowd.

"Are we waking you up?" he called to those inside them.

Representatives of Red Coats and American Building Maintenance and an attorney representing the companies negotiating with the union did not respond Wednesday to emails and telephone calls seeking comment.

Cole said he was there to make sure residents of Baltimore get "something that resembles a livable wage."

"These are roughly 700 people from Baltimore who are part of this particular action," he said. "It's a big deal to them. They are barely able — and in some cases not able — to pay their own bills."

The Baltimore custodians are among more than 60,000, from Hartford, Conn., to Virginia, taking part in a campaign for higher wages, union officials said. Days ago, the region's cleaning workers voted to authorize their union's bargaining committee to authorize a strike.

A spokeswoman for the union said she wouldn't say what wage the organization would consider high enough to avoid a strike.