

My name is Heather Solares. I am an Emergency Medical Technician Basic with the Jersey City Medical Center Emergency Medical Services. I am a general member of AFSCME Local 2254.

I am the hardworking mother of three small children. I work the night shift and attend college classes during the day. Obviously, sleep is a rarity, and it is certainly not by choice. I do what I have to do to support the family that I love. I do it to make sure there are lights when we flip the switch, water when we turn the knob, and food in the kitchen when we are hungry. I also maintain my full time employment status so that in the event we were to seek medical attention, we would be able to, knowing there is ample health insurance coverage for us to do so.

Through the years, I have watched my life change dramatically. I can appreciate the prospect of not having an income, sweating illness due to lacking health benefits, and watching the bank foreclose on a home due to inability to afford it. It is with consideration to these things I write this letter.

I am somewhat unnerved at the way our union is handling our contract, negotiations, and essentially our employment status. I did not vote as to whether or not the contract offer was accepted or rejected. I did not feel the membership was well enough informed regarding the offers being made to be able to make such a decision. If anything, there was a large push for the union members to vote the offer down, as all that was offered to us was seemingly negative propaganda. (And before it becomes a point of argument, no, I do not attend your meetings as my life is incredibly complicated. Free time is not a luxury I am privy to. Instead, I trusted that I was part of a union that was dedicated to doing the very best for their members.) I am starting to see now that the agenda that may not be taking the working family into consideration whatsoever. So, I am going to give it to you from the working person's perspective. (I am also fairly confident that I am not exactly alone in what I am about to say.)

I have read every email, every letter, and have listened to every voice who is offering opinions and "advice" on our contract situation. I see that there have been changes to our contract which are not exactly ideal to some of the members of our union. I do not wish to get into specifics (that, after all is why we pay the union, is it not?). I just want to offer that economic times are changing, and at this point, things we need should trump the things we want. Secured employment and the promise of a steady income are both substantial needs to everyone. Decent health benefits are a "luxury" as far as many are concerned; in our case, we actually have them, and with the ever increasing price of health care, they are also a substantial need. I know there are multiple other points of contention with the contract offer (i.e....the merging of job titles, only getting paid for the time you actually 'work', merging of all paid time off, etc...). Concern for these things is understood, however, aren't we losing sight of the "big picture" here?? You HAVE a job title. You HAVE paid time off. YOU HAVE A JOB. If you think it's that bad, go talk to the father of three who cannot secure a decent job or the single mother of two who is thankful for having a job and the paid time off, albeit limited, to actually spend on occasion with her children. Then, take another look at the offers made to us by JCMC.

Furthermore, a STRIKE?!?! I know I can certainly speak on behalf of a fair amount of members when I say I will NOT strike. I cannot afford to lose my job, I will not depend on strike pay to pay my bills (whenever strike pay will even kick in), and I WILL NOT sacrifice the security that I have that comes with carrying a valid health benefits card, God forbid I or my family should fall ill. Notwithstanding that every one of us who signed up to work in the emergency medical services field did so in order to help people in their time of need. It may not be a super personal priority, but we all owe it to the people we serve to show up and perform, not leave it to some “fly by the night” EMT who wants the chance to “play” in a “big city”. Oh, and while I’m at it, EMS, our contract with the city is up this year. Do we really need the negative image of being a “striking” unit?? From my perspective, at least, I think our striking adds fuel to an already burning fire that other projects have to take our jobs.

Please understand this is not a letter to critique the union. This is a mere reminder of the interests that should be kept foremost in the situation at hand. After all, on the AFSCME website, it reads, “..We advocate for fairness in the workplace, excellence in public service, and prosperity and opportunity for working families.” I am a part of a working family, exactly who you advocate for. By pushing me and those like me to reject a decent contract offer, and further urging us to strike, are you really seeking our ‘prosperity and opportunity’, never mind the ‘excellence of public service’??? I question that. Maybe it’s time you step back and readjust the priorities that are fueling exactly what is going on here, and hopefully adjust things before the outcome is more of a detriment to the working person and the families that they love.

Sincerely,

Heather R. Solares, EMT-B