After months of dealing with bad bargaining by employers, Twin Cities janitors and security officers have set a date for a strike vote. Today members of SEIU Local 26 began circulating strike petitions for a vote scheduled for February 9.

“We’ve tried to bargain in good faith,” said Demetruis Moore, a member of the bargaining committee who’s worked as a security officer for more than five years. “But it’s clear they have no intention of doing so. Either come to the table and bargain in good faith, or we’re done. We’ll see you in the streets.”

“We’re here to show the companies we mean business, unlike them,” said John Vinje, a security officer from Big Lake. “They show up hours late for meetings, or don’t even show up at all. We’re ready to bargain, are they?”

The bargaining committees made the announcement today at a rally in downtown Minneapolis – they were then joined by workers and allies for a march through the skyways of the buildings they work in.

“It’s not fair that while our productivity is going up, our wages are not keeping pace,” said Margarita Del Angel, a janitor who spoke in Spanish at the rally. “We are being forced to do more and more work for the same amount, so our employers can cut back on workers and save money at our expense. And now, they are demanding to pay us even less. They want to cut wages for more than half of us. Some of us would see our wages cut by 40%. It is already hard enough to support a family on these wages. Additional cuts are impossible. They want to lock us into poverty, while continuing to grow richer at our expense.”

Members of SEIU Local 26 clean and protect some of the Twin Cities’ largest office buildings that house some of the wealthiest corporations in the country, including Target, US Bank, and Wells Fargo. The contracts expired December 31, but after months of negotiations, employers are still unwilling to bargain in good faith.

“The average full-time worker qualifies for public assistance due to low wages and a lack of affordable healthcare,” said Harrison Bullard, Vice President of Local 26. “When workers are forced to rely on public assistance because the rich, corporate elite don’t pay the cost of doing business, all of us end up paying more.”

The average worker in Local 26 earns $20,503 annually. The federal poverty line for a family of four is $23,050. In a survey, 91% of members said they would use a raise to pay for basic necessities, including groceries, school, rent or mortgage.

“For janitors, demands from employers include cutting wages for more than 50 percent of workers,” said Del Angel. “The average janitor cleans the equivalent of 30 houses in one night. We deserve living wages that allow us to support our families. We deserve affordable healthcare.”

For the first time ever, more than 6,000 janitors and security officers in the Twin Cities and suburbs are negotiating new contracts simultaneously. In 2008, a new contract was negotiated

for 1,000 security officers after they struck in downtown St. Paul and Minneapolis. In 2006 and 2009, janitors voted to authorize strikes, but both were narrowly averted.

If Local 26 members vote on February 9 to authorize a strike, the bargaining committees would then decide when and if a strike was necessary, as well as set a date for a strike. If a strike were to happen, it would be one of the largest strikes to ever happen in downtown Minneapolis.

“We are tired of the runaround,” said Moore. “While we are proposing fair raises to move workers forward, our employers are demanding cuts. This would move workers backwards. The corporate elite in this country have the power to help unlock a better future for all of Minnesota. It’s time they do that.”