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## **Angels baseball, paying the little guy peanuts**

**The team is one of the wealthiest in the league, yet it's trying to nickel-and-dime its stadium service workers in contract negotiations.**

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The Angels are one of the richest and most successful franchises in Major League Baseball — in fact, in all pro sports.

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They're valued by Forbes at [\\$554 million](#) (up 6% from a year ago), carry the fourth-largest player payroll in the major leagues, and at this point in the season rank fifth in per-game attendance. As they're very much in the hunt for their division lead, it's quite possible that lucrative post-season games will be added to the schedule.

So why are they trying to nickel-and-dime their stadium ushers, ticket sellers and janitors?

In February, the team opened negotiations to renew the expired three-year contract for 400 workers at Angel Stadium of Anaheim by proposing to freeze wages, according to the Service Employees International Union, which represents the staff.

More recently, according to the SEIU, the team has offered 20-cent hourly increases in the second and third year of the contract, but has also proposed to eliminate several bonus provisions, including extra pay for working playoff and World Series games.

The union said the team has offered to retain the employees' bonus for working the All-Star

Game, but since the Angels hosted that game last year and it might be two or three decades before they do so again, that offer might seem just a teensy bit ... what's the word? Oh, yes: cynical.

The employees are part-time and seasonal. Typically they work at the stadium to make a few extra dollars to supplement their day jobs or retirement income. They're virtually the definition of workers without bargaining leverage.

So it should give you a clue to how frustrated they are that on July 26, after decisively voting down the team's latest contract proposal, they gave their union leadership the authority to call a strike.

"It was the last straw," Alex Vega, 50, a shop steward with eight seasons of experience as an usher, told me. "They've tightened the belt and finally people said, 'That's enough.' "

Though the negotiations are currently at an impasse, the two sides aren't done talking. Another session is expected to be scheduled this week or next with the help of a federal mediator. I offered the Angels an opportunity to provide me with their position in the dispute. They declined, stating that they did not wish to "discuss specific issues while we are in negotiations."

Let's think for a moment about who these workers are. They're the people who sell you your tickets, show you to your seats, keep the stands clean and ready for the next game.

They're the Angels employees with the largest direct impact on a fan experience that ranks very high among major league ballparks. Yet if they're doing their jobs well, they're almost invisible. As a regular attendee at Angel Stadium, I can tell you that in my experience they're unfailingly polite and efficient.

They're not entirely powerless. A strike would certainly interfere with the smooth functioning of Angel Stadium, even more so if the Angels get into a late-season pennant race and crowds multiply. Other unions active at the stadium, including the Teamsters, who represent parking staff and food service drivers, have expressed their support, raising the prospect that their members would refuse to cross an SEIU picket line.

The Angel Stadium employees are the worst paid among all California ballpark workers in their job classifications, the SEIU says. Here are some comparisons provided by the union, which also represents some of the workers at the other parks:

Angel Stadium ushers (the lowest paid among the affected employees) earn \$11.21 an hour. At Dodger Stadium the rate is \$12.77, and at the Oakland Coliseum it's \$14.03. Janitors in Anaheim receive \$11.50 an hour; at Chavez Ravine it's \$12.31, in Oakland \$17.50 and at the San Francisco Giants' AT&T Park \$15.15. Ticket sellers at Angel Stadium get \$13.65 an hour, but at the San Diego Padres' Petco Park they get \$16.43.

These figures typically apply to journeyman workers, who are defined differently at the various venues. Angel Stadium workers generally don't touch the cited hourly wage until they've accumulated 720 hours on the job, a threshold likely to take more than a season, even two. But at Oakland the workers move up in steps starting with as few as 100 hours.

Union officials say that previous Angel Stadium contracts regularly included annual raises, instilling some hope that Angels workers would eventually reach parity with their Dodger Stadium cousins. That expectation ended when the Angels opened negotiations this year by offering them nothing.

Obviously these are not now and have never been jobs on which you can raise a family. A season's pay can range from \$5,000 to \$10,000.

"It used to be said that this was just a part-time job for people who love baseball," says Dave Stilwell, assistant to the president of SEIU United Service Workers West. "That was true in the past. Nowadays, though, most of our workers are there because they need some second job, or they're retired folks who work there because times are tough and they need to supplement their income."

The union says it's been told that the total payroll for its members, including Social Security taxes, comes to about \$6 million, which is a tad higher than what the team pays the average player on its roster, based on its 2011 payroll of \$138.5 million. (I'm using [USA Today's salary database](#).) The union said management also has argued that times are tough for the team.

That's true in some ways, and ridiculous in some ways. Due in part to the crummy economy, paid attendance has dipped at major league ballparks, as it has for pro sports and big-ticket entertainment events generally. Perhaps in recognition of the trend, the Angels have been very effective at holding the line on the cost of attending a game. Team Marketing Report's authoritative [fan cost index](#), which encompasses ticket prices, food and drink, parking and merchandise, ranks the Angels as baseball's fourth-least expensive team, cheaper this year by 1.7% compared with 2010. The Dodgers, by contrast, are the seventh-most expensive, though also cheaper by a smidgen vs. last year.

On the other hand, the Angels are still among baseball's biggest draws: The team is on track to record its ninth consecutive season of [3-million-plus attendance](#). The franchise's estimated value has tripled since 2003, when Arte Moreno bought it from Walt Disney Co. for \$184 million.

It's proper to note, too, that as a team the San Diego Padres, who pay their staff better than the Angels, are worth less and perform worse at the turnstiles. (In Oakland, the workers are employed by a management company serving the publicly owned Coliseum, not by the Oakland A's club.)

There seems to be a sense among some workers that, although Moreno is a fans' favorite as

Angels owner, his purchase of the club has marked a transition in employee relations at Angel Stadium.

"I wouldn't have stayed here for 30 years if I didn't enjoy my job and meeting the people and doing the things I do," says Kathryn Lawson, 68, a ticket seller who is one of the stadium's longest-serving employees. "It has been a very nice environment to work in." Yet lately, she says, "we don't seem to be appreciated anymore."

Regardless of whether the team's financial situation is as tough as the Angels claim, it's remarkable that they've chosen to place the burden on the shoulders of their lowest-paid and most service-oriented employees. The fans in the stands should think about that the next time the scoreboard solicits them to "make some noise."

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