

KELLY GORDON: Today is day 95 on the picket line for a group of public employees in the North Metro. Workers with the Teamsters local 320 union in Chisago County went on strike back in the spring on May 1. That's after a long set of contract negotiations failed, and those began last fall. It's the longest county worker strike on record, according to the State Bureau of Mediation Services, which started keeping track in the early 1970s.

The striking workers include people employed at the County government center and mostly health and human services staff, including social workers. It was that second group that got the attention of my next guest. Hana Ikramuddin is a Minnesota-based reporter for the imprint, a national news outlet that covers child welfare and youth justice. And she joins me now. Hi, Hana.

HANA IKRAMUDDIN: Hey. Thanks for having me.

KELLY GORDON: Yeah. So let's start here. What kind of work do these health and human service workers do, the ones that you took an interest in and profiled?

HANA IKRAMUDDIN: A lot of these county workers are doing some really essential tasks for county residents. We're talking about people who are doing child protective services investigations, helping county residents get access to SNAP and Medicaid, children handling children and adult mental health issues.

KELLY GORDON: So really important work. So who's doing it now given this very long strike?

HANA IKRAMUDDIN: Since the strike started on May 1, a lot of that work has been turned over to county managers and supervisors, and a team of temporary workers that the county has been hiring.

KELLY GORDON: OK. And then as you've done this reporting, what's your understanding of the impact that this is having on those families and the children that you said that the original workers that are on strike are typically working with?

HANA IKRAMUDDIN: Both sides have agreed that this has been a hardship on children and families. There are about 38 foster youth that are served by the department right now as of late July. Those children are already kids who lack stability in their lives, according to department staff-- not having stable adults in their lives. Instead, they're having to adjust to new social workers or temporary workers while the strike has been going on.

KELLY GORDON: And this is for kids who already have had a very unsettled childhood and all of those things. So these people that they were kind of used to working with now, they're just dealing with whoever kind of happens to be in the desk that day. What did you hear from striking workers about this? Like, how are they feeling and what's keeping them motivated?

HANA IKRAMUDDIN: For them, the main sticking points have come down to wage increases in 2026 and 2027, and health care plan contributions from the County. They say that they're worried that county workers can't focus on being present with children and families if they're busy thinking about wages or how the next time they're going to visit the doctor.

KELLY GORDON: Yeah. And they're literally picketing outside of the center. Yes?

HANA Right. Yeah, I was there just two Fridays ago and I was able to see them.

IKRAMUDDIN:

KELLY I have to imagine that as they're there at the building, they see their former clients coming in. Do they have
GORDON: interactions with people? Is there some kind of crosstalk? I have to imagine everybody is feeling the tension.

HANA I spoke to one social worker on the picket line who said that while she's been out, she's seen At, least two of her
IKRAMUDDIN: clients approach the County, building for help. She said those clients have said they support her strikes, but have been concerned about getting what they need from the county.

KELLY Sure. As I said, this is a record-breaking strike because the next longest worker strike was 67 days in Dakota
GORDON: County. Of course, that's nowhere near the longest city worker strike, which happened back in 1977. That was a county worker strike that lasted 240 days in Park Rapids. I'm wondering what you're hearing. How Chisago County is preparing for the possibility that this strike could continue to drag on.

HANA County Administrator Chase Burnham told me that they are preparing for this to continue on. He said that they're
IKRAMUDDIN: planning to continue hiring temporary staff When, I spoke to him just a few weeks ago.

KELLY Is there any sign of when it can end, or do you if there are continuing talks between the union and the county?
GORDON:

HANA It's not clear to me when the strike will end or what will take to end it. The county administrator told me that he's
IKRAMUDDIN: actually not sure either what could end the strike when I spoke to him in July.

KELLY And I think that I read in your reporting that there are some people who've actually even just quit at this point
GORDON: because it is taking so long. Is that accurate?

HANA Social workers have told me that they're concerned about getting their benefits and wages. That's been a
IKRAMUDDIN: concern that people might quit.

KELLY Right. Well, I really appreciate your reporting, Hana, and your time today.
GORDON:

HANA Thank you.
IKRAMUDDIN:

KELLY Hana Ikramuddin is a reporter covering child welfare for the national news outlet, *The Imprint*.
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