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A CLEAN BREAK

Striking janitors won a major battle late Wednesday in their fight for decent wages and benefits when Acting Governor Jane Swift broke the state's \$1.9 million contract with Unico Service Company, the area's largest cleaning company, and invited bids from competing companies that would meet the workers' demands. The action removes another brick in the wall of corporate resistance to the janitors' call for modest wage increases and health insurance coverage. We hope it is followed by others until the area's large maintenance contractors settle the strike.

Swift's move was not the first victory for the janitors since they began striking Sept. 30, but it was a breakthrough because it provides a road map for other corporate citizens. Last Friday, six smaller cleaning companies representing about 20 percent of the unionized workers broke off from the largest contractors and reached an interim agreement to provide wage hikes and benefits. Now any building owner or corporate customer wanting to follow Swift's lead and find a more generous contractor has somewhere to go.

And there may be takers. Early last week, executives at several major Boston area companies including John Hancock Financial Services, FleetBoston Financial, and State Street Corp., said they would be willing to spend more to ensure the janitors

got a better deal. Hancock CEO David D'Allesandro, one of the city's more progressive business leaders, calculated that meeting the janitors' demands would cost his company between \$1.3 million and \$1.5 million over the life of the 3 1/2-year contract, an amount he was willing to spend.

Although these companies are not direct parties to the negotiations, they have been targeted by Local 254 of the Service Employees International Union, which sees, quite correctly, the extreme gaps between full-time workers at these firms and the contract janitors who clean their buildings.

Meeting the workers' demands would have an "infinitesimal" impact on most companies, in the words of former Stride Rite CEO Arnold Hiatt. They would get an increase of roughly \$3 an hour over 3 1/2 years - to \$13 an hour. The health benefits would only apply to buildings of 400,000 square feet or more and would be phased in as workers leave part-time jobs that are consolidated into full-time positions. Even with the increase to \$13 an hour, a full-time janitor would be earning well under the self-sufficiency standard set for a family of four in Boston.

Swift, freed from the pressures of a reelection campaign, showed both compassion and shrewd gamesmanship with her action Wednesday. She deserves praise for recognizing that even in times of shrinking revenues, a rich state like Massachusetts should be able to give some small measure of dignity and fairness to its low-paid workers.