

New York City workers demand better wages and conditions

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Tens of thousands of New York City workers marched in lower Manhattan on Wednesday, May 12 to demand decent wages and increased spending on education, healthcare and other social services. The largest labor demonstration in years included members of public employee unions as well as every other section of the city work force.

Sponsored by the New York City Central Labor Council, the march's largest contingents came from American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees District Council 37, Hospital Workers Local 1199 and the United Federation of Teachers, but it also included garment workers, operating engineers, building service workers, transit workers and many others. A contingent of teachers marched from the Board of Education into Manhattan across the Brooklyn Bridge. A District Council 37 Local 1199J contingent came with three buses from Newark, New Jersey. A crowd estimated at 50,000 converged on the blocks surrounding City Hall.

Fed up with years of concessions contracts agreed to by the union leaders—including wage freezes, job cuts and other give-backs—workers are increasingly in a mood to fight. Everywhere they see big business politicians crowing about huge budget surpluses, the boom on Wall Street, and supposed prosperity and good times for all. Far from participating in this, hundreds of thousands of working class families have seen their purchasing power and living conditions decline. The budget cuts in social services have worsened working conditions for workers in the public sector. Workers denounced these conditions and the role of New York Governor George Pataki and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

Teachers who came as a group by subway from PS 128 in the Washington Heights section of upper

Manhattan complained of overcrowding. "There are 1,500 students, including an annex, learning in hallways, with one gym and one cafeteria," said one teacher. "Giuliani came to our school and told us our productivity is too low. Parents suffer from cuts in affordable daycare."

"We need to show we are strong in numbers," said another teacher. "Not as a union, but all the workers here as sisters and brothers. We want more than raises, but better conditions. No exploiting by sweatshops," she said, pointing to the nearby group of Asian workers carrying signs that said "Stop sweatshops."

Under banners of the International Union of Operating Engineers, Local 30, a worker who maintains air conditioning and boilers for New York City complained, "Our contract was bad." Another worker said, "We have not had a contract in five years. The last time they gave up sick days, promising we would get them back, and we still don't have them."

Many workers denounced the productivity drive they faced. Women from Local 1549 of DC 37 carried a sign saying, "Tripled work responsibility." Among a group of welfare workers, one explained, "I work until 9 p.m. Otherwise I wouldn't be doing a good job. But there is no more money. I want more money."

When asked why they were at the demonstration, "downsizing" was the angry reply of several workers supplying social services to patients at Coler Memorial Hospital. "We have a 60-patient caseload, most with multiple handicaps. They lost 20 workers who have not been replaced yet. Workers leave in frustration. I am doing the work of three. I give my free time, I work on Sundays."

Administrative retirees from Local 1549 explained that they had only received a 2 percent increase in their pensions since 1992. "We want a COLA [cost of living

allowance]! They need to stop cutting healthcare for senior citizens. And senior citizen rent regulation--as soon as we get a raise, everyone wants, the landlords want more."

The mayor's response to the rally was to paint the underpaid and overworked demonstrators as greedy. Posturing for his right-wing statewide and national constituency as he prepares to run for the US Senate, Mayor Giuliani proclaimed, "The age and the day of the give-away should be over." In reality, there have been two decades of give-backs from, not give-aways to, the working class.

The union officials who called the May 12 demonstration, in most cases the same bureaucrats who imposed concessions contracts on their members for the past two decades, are seeking to rebound from the recent series of corruption scandals, including the one which toppled the long-entrenched leadership of District Council 37. They would like the rank-and-file to forget the role of disgraced former DC 37 chief Stanley Hill and his alliance with Giuliani, which was built on concessions contracts. They also aim to contain the growing militancy by strengthening their ties to the Democrats, the same Democrats whose complicity enabled Republicans Giuliani and Pataki to impose record cuts in the city and state budgets.

For the rank-and-file workers, however, this was an opportunity to vent huge grievances which have built up over years, and to take advantage of a weakening in Giuliani's political support to press their case for decent wages and conditions. Coming on the heels of growing demonstrations against the police murder of African immigrant Amadou Diallo, the City Hall protest expressed growing anger in the working class and the deepening crisis of the Giuliani administration.



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