

As state economic crisis deepens

## Forced furloughs begin for California state employees

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On Friday, February 6, California's state employees were forced to take their first day off without pay as Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's order of twice-monthly mandatory furloughs took effect. More than 200,000 state workers are affected by the order, which will close most government offices on the first and third Fridays of each month until at least mid-2010.

The governor's office claims that the furloughs will save the state \$1.3 billion. Schwarzenegger announced the order in December of last year in response to the state's \$42 billion budget deficit. The governor and state legislature are currently in negotiations on a massive cost-cutting program that will place the burden of the economic crisis on the backs of working people. The state has already halted many payments, including tax refunds and welfare checks.

A partial list of the state offices facing regular closures includes the Departments of Motor Vehicles, Fish and Game, Food and Agriculture (although border protection employees remain unaffected), as well as the Energy Commission, Housing Finance Agency, Veterans Affairs, and agencies handling real estate, social services, teacher credentialing, and workers compensation—in short, government facilities that provide a variety of services to working people throughout the state, many of which are critical to those most in need.

Some agencies considered essential, like fire stations and the Highway Patrol, have been exempted from the furloughs. The state's unemployment offices remained open, though they have been in a *de facto* state of dysfunction since the number of unemployment claims has mushroomed in recent months. Whether the office

is open or not, applicants are finding it increasingly difficult to get their claims processed as the backlog of claims piles up.

On Friday, offices of the state's Department of Motor Vehicles witnessed motorists, taken by surprise by the office closure, expressing bewilderment and at times anger over the closures. Some DMV employees showed up at their workplaces to inform motorists that the offices were closed; others participated in small union-sponsored rallies.

The furloughs, which amount to a 9.2 percent pay cut, come in the midst of a deepening economic crisis in the state and the world economy as a whole. California's official unemployment rate stands at 9.3 percent, a 15-year high. At nearly 2 percent higher than the national average, this represents more than 1.7 million Californians officially unemployed.

The furloughed workers have now joined 7.8 million other Americans who have been forced to work less than full-time, an increase of more than 3 million from last year.

With the recession increasing the strain on state and local coffers, some cities in California—among them Redlands, Oakland, San Jose and Berkeley—have already imposed or are in the process of instituting furloughs for municipal workers. Couched as the lesser of two evils (furloughs vs. layoffs) and sometimes presented as "Voluntary Time Off," these measures are part of a growing trend across the nation. On the state level, Maryland, Hawaii and Ohio are among the states that have proposed or instituted furloughs.

In California, state employee unions—most notably the Service Employees International Union (SEIU)—legally challenged the furloughs, but a Superior Court ruling

last week upheld the governor's authority to issue the order, clearing the way for its enactment. State unions had also requested an injunction, which was rejected by a state appellate court.

The SEIU, rather than fighting in the interests of those it supposedly represents, is effectively offering to help Sacramento impose the attacks on its membership's living standards.

A few days before the first "Furlough Friday," SEIU local 1000 spokesman Jim Zamora said, "We're trying to help the governor save the same amount of money he wants to save, but to do so in a way that is more flexible for state employees and less harmful to the services we provide."

When last Friday finally arrived, Zamora complained to reporters that "[m]ore than a week ago, local 1000 presented the governor's negotiators with a deal that would have prevented the closure of state offices, created an orderly, flexible and manageable furlough process, prevented chaos and saved the state hundreds of millions of dollars."

In other words, the union is not going to challenge the rationale of, or mount serious resistance to, the furloughs and other attacks on state employees; it just wants to have a place at the table when the attacks are being hammered out.

However, as one state worker pointed out in a February 4 article in the *Daily Californian Online*: "The purpose of the furloughs is to misdirect everyone, [it] points at labor and state workers and says they're the problem." "We are a drop in the bucket for the state deficit problem," said Chris Hodgkinson, an employee at the California State Public Health Lab in Richmond.

State employees in California should not have to sacrifice a dime of their already inadequate paychecks to resolve a state budget crisis that they played absolutely no role in creating. For well over a decade, working people in California have been facing a continuous onslaught on their living standards, with many of those employed by the government suffering the consequences of endless cutbacks in services and shrinking budgets.

At the same time, the number of billionaires residing in the state has grown continuously, with 90 such individuals currently residing in California. It is an expression of the complete irrationality of the prevailing socio-economic system that not only the

wages of 200,000 people, but also the public services upon which nearly 40 million people rely are being put in jeopardy in order to defend the wealth of this narrow elite.



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