

San Diego imposes drastic cuts on city workers

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At the request of San Diego, California Mayor Jerry Sanders, late Tuesday night the City Council voted to declare an impasse in contract negotiations with two of the five labor unions representing 10,500 city workers. This declaration means that the city will be free to impose drastic pay and benefit cuts at will upon workers in the Police Officers Association and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 127.

In last minute negotiations, an impasse was averted with the three other unions: The San Diego Municipal Employees Association, San Diego City Firefighters Local 145 and the Deputy City Attorneys Association. The unions agreed to similar pay and benefit cuts as those that will be imposed on the Police Officers Association and AFSCME workers. Initial reports are that the Firefighters Local 145 has accepted \$5.8 million in wage and benefit cuts; the details of the other contracts have not yet been reported.

Throughout the day, hundreds of workers from the five unions protested at City Hall against the unfair cuts and the breakdown in contract negotiations. Tuesday's City Council meeting began with dozens of city workers testifying in front of the council, demanding a halt to cuts.

Local press described the City Council vote as "unexpected" because Democrats, who were backed by the labor unions in their elections, occupy six of the eight spots on the council. The unanimous vote to declare an impasse came at 10:25pm, after hours in a closed-door session by the City Council.

Union officials agreed in advance to the logic of Mayor Sanders, who formulated the process as a decision between job losses and wage and benefit cuts. Sanders is attempting to close a \$60 million budget gap

in the \$3.01 billion Fiscal Year 2010 budget, in part by imposing over \$30 million in cuts on city workers. He had asked that all five unions accept a 6 percent across the board pay cut in order to help resolve the budget deficit.

In testimony before the City Council, Sanders stated, "Reducing our workforce would not only adversely impact employees and their families, it would also erode public services through the closure of libraries and recreation centers and reduced public safety coverage. This is not acceptable to me and it is not acceptable to the public."

This statement by Sanders shows that he is indifferent to the social crisis that is already ravaging San Diego workers and their families. Hundreds of millions have already been cut from local school budgets, unemployment has risen dramatically, and bankruptcies and foreclosures continue at record rates. (See "California's new budget and the social crisis in San Diego")

While the city reports that 874 positions have already been cut since Fiscal Year 2007, the current budget does not ensure that additional job losses will not occur in the future.

President of the AFSCME Local 127, Ann Smith, stated "Local 127 workers are more than willing to make sacrifices to help the city to get over this slump, but what the mayor is proposing amounts to 'Draconian' cuts for the city's lowest-paid workers."

While Smith declares these cuts 'draconian', this duplicitous comment highlights the fact that while the union bosses retain the rhetoric of defending workers, they remain complicit in organizing with the employers and government officials the slashing of their living standards. It is clear in the current economic climate that union bosses will do whatever they can to avoid

open clashes between workers and employers, as this would create a situation in which the unions' complicity would be completely exposed.

Sanders has employed the much repeated rhetoric of shared sacrifice and defending the public interest. However, he attempts to isolate the lowering of living standards in this particular case from the continued attack on workers by California Governor Schwarzenegger and the Democratic Party-controlled state legislature, as well as by the Obama Administration. These attacks on workers continue while trillions of dollars are being placed in the hands of the banks, and while the California state government increases tax cuts to big business.

Neither option being forced upon workers—wage and benefit cuts or job losses—are acceptable for those who are already struggling to meet the basic needs. The wage and benefit cuts should be seen the larger context of the social crisis affecting the working class.

The options being placed in front of San Diego city workers are not unlike those facing California residents in next month's special election. Voters will be asked to decide on which social programs will take cuts in order to make up the state budget deficit. While the 'choice' between where the cuts will be made is given to the population, what is non-negotiable is the fact that the burden of the current economic crisis will be placed on their shoulders.



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