

San Diego's Union Tribune attacks city workers

Kevin Martinez, Alfonso Santana, Ettore Severi
29 July 2009

The *Union Tribune* has recently published the results of its investigation of the San Diego city payroll. (City's payroll surged in '08)

The publication of this extensive three-part series is significant not for its findings, which are for the most part unsurprising, but for the underlying agenda it reveals. In the face of the ongoing economic crisis, which assumes particularly sharp forms in California, the capitalist class and its media representatives seek to blame the working class to conceal their own responsibility for the disaster.

San Diego city workers have been the target of a prolonged, decade-long campaign by various right-wing figures and outfits in the city, including the *Union Tribune*. In particular, the "scandal" surrounding the city workers' pension fund has significantly shaped the political history of the city in the past several years. With the onset of the crisis, including the collapse of the real estate market, right-wing forces naturally fall back on a familiar scapegoat: the ostensibly selfish and greedy city worker.

The overall tone of the article is calculated to induce in the reader a sense of outrage. The series begins with the title, "City's payroll surged in '08." Later, the reader is informed that in fact the payroll grew by 6 percent for the year. The city payroll, therefore, rather than "surging," in fact managed to outpace the national inflation rate in 2008 (3.85 percent) by a very modest amount.

Nevertheless, the article strikes a note of alarm and outrage: "San Diego is in a constant financial crisis. Why did it pay its city employees millions more last year?"

The article itself shows how the work force and payroll alike have been dropping for the past four years, as a result of deep cuts that will no doubt affect the quality and availability of a range of services. The *Union Tribune*, however, chooses to emphasize the increase in payroll from 2007 to 2008: "it helps put into perspective the \$43 million in wage and benefit reductions that will take effect ... the savings are about the same as last year's increase in payroll."

The newspaper strives to convey the impression that the Republican mayor of the city is unwilling or unable to slash budgets, while the unions are running amok accumulating

scandalous perks for their members. Although "Sanders has trumpeted 'tough fiscal discipline,'" the *Union Tribune* claims that its findings "challenge rhetoric by both union leaders and Mayor Jerry Sanders."

The article is peppered with language that is meant to suggest a conspiracy going on behind the back of taxpayers: "What's not usually mentioned are *special negotiated payouts* that are often *buried deep inside* dense union contracts." "The payouts are *hidden in plain sight*, scattered through union contracts under various headings."

As the WSWWS noted in 2008, for example, although the mayor and the trade union bureaucracy do collaborate closely, the reality is that they share the same goal: to put the burden of the crisis entirely on the backs of working people.

The fact that the newspaper, commonly referred to as the "Non-Union Tribune" maintains its hostility against what used to be workers' organizations is partly an ideological residue left from previous historical epochs, and partly a pragmatic way to maintain constant pressure on the union bureaucracy. Workers in San Diego, as everywhere else, today look at the unions at best as purveyors of bad news.

A substantial part of the article is devoted to "add-ons"—additional payments given to workers with special qualifications or assigned to unpopular or more difficult or dangerous tasks.

The *Union Tribune* strives to portray this system unfavorably, insinuating that it is an important factor in explaining the ongoing crisis. The add-ons are described as "unusual benefits," a Byzantine, out of control system of "more than 160 types of payouts."

Most of the actual examples described in the article however, will seem eminently sensible to the average person. "Employees, who work in confined spaces, such as inside manholes or underground chambers, get an extra 5 percent." "City engineers and architects who have specific certifications or licenses get 5 percent to 15 percent add-ons."

Next to those examples is a picture calling attention to **10** paid **Holidays** and **one floating** (bold in the original), Paid Leave Time which after working 16 years enables a worker to get 27 days of vacation per year. Even more shocking to the *Union Tribune* is the option to cash out this Paid Leave Time.

Is this is supposed to cause outrage amongst other workers?

The *Tribune* quotes Michael Kolb, director of the National Public Employer Labor Relations Association, “They (city workers) have so many extra premiums that you can’t just look at an hourly rate.” The premiums admitted by Kolb are holidays and overtime. Is this what an extensive “investigative” report has discovered in the middle of an economic crisis?

A great deal of the increase in payroll, moreover, is due to a substantial increase in the paying of overtime, particularly to firefighters. It should not be difficult to recognize that this is simply the flip-side of the layoffs and cuts already imposed on many services: as employment in various agencies are stretched thin, without a corresponding decrease in the social needs they fulfill, less workers will have to work more, resulting in an increase in overall overtime payments.

Among the additional material published in conjunction with the article is an image titled “What else would \$41 million buy?” This is the total amount of the rise in payroll. The article mentions resurfacing roads, sidewalk repairs, new libraries and new utility lines. But this approach might be more insightful than the newspaper might have hoped.

On the basis of the existing profit system, socially useful, if not essential services are deemed expendable in a major urban center. That is the crucial issue. To provide for the services would necessarily require increasing employment, wage, and possibly overtime expenditure. Working people are not a dispensable factor in the process of production. The same cannot be said, however, for the hedge fund managers and corporate raiders whose multi-million, if not multi-billion dollar, bonuses the *Union Tribune* does not subject to the same scrutiny.

With what intention does the *Union Tribune* make these arguments? The paper perhaps hopes to persuade a section of middle class people and even more backward workers to demand that city workers give up altogether “unusual benefits” that are already being eroded. In other words, the situation for working people would supposedly be better if they all conceded their overtime, paid holidays and benefits. This is the sort of political climate the paper strives to foster.

But the economic crisis was not caused by workers who cash in their vacation and work overtime. Nor will it be fixed by removing these “excesses.” The economic crisis is of a global and systemic nature.

The underlying assumption of the article, that there is something peculiarly wrong in San Diego because of the undue power and benefits of city workers, is belied by the global reach of the crisis, which is decimating jobs and services everywhere with little regard for geographic peculiarities. It is not an accident that the press is playing a similarly despicable role in the ongoing strike of the Toronto city workers (See “What is behind the media’s venomous attack on striking Toronto city workers”).

Judging by the online responses to the article, the readership

of the paper seems to have responded very unfavorably to the series, and rightly so. Adding to its overall unpleasant character, the article mentions the names and salaries of specific people who had received a raise. In this sense, the newspaper is not doing itself any favors in publishing such material. So why take three days to indict workers as the main obstacle toward a solution to the crisis?

Like all historically exhausted social forces, the capitalist class needs to persuade first and foremost itself that it is not at fault for the ongoing disasters, that its existence is not redundant, irrational, and parasitic. To do that, at this point in history, the bourgeoisie can only scrape together the second-rate pens-for-hire it deserves.

The *Union Tribune* is a traditionally right-wing newspaper which endorsed George Bush, John McCain, and all the shameless barbarism they represented in the last presidential elections. The series on the city payroll is not the first attack workers have received from the *Tribune*.

A previous article written in 2008 by the same authors (Eleanor Yang Su and Agustin Armendariz), shows a similar pattern: beneath a veneer of journalistic objectivity stands a definite, reactionary political perspective.

In reference to the housing bubble crash, the authors wrote at the time that “Many home buyers *gorged* on easy credit.”

The authors continued, “Looking back, several say they erred by trusting mortgage brokers and lenders who told them they could afford it. *Some feel a twinge of guilt about the nation’s credit crisis and the role their bad mortgages played in prompting the historic \$700 billion government bailout* passed last month.”

The capitalist class and its representatives necessarily traffic in slander and innuendos. From a rotten social position can only flow rotten arguments. But in the case of the San Diego newspaper the process is embarrassingly direct. The *Union Tribune* was in fact recently purchased by Platinum Equity, a merger and acquisition company. It is exactly these kinds of outfits, the finance section of the capitalist class that is most responsible for the economic crisis. The *Union Tribune’s* hatchet job exposes most of all, the political bankruptcy of the class it seeks to defend.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact