

Los Angeles unions back Democrats' assault on city workers

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The city of Los Angeles, California faces a \$405 million deficit during the current fiscal year. The administration of Democratic Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, with the full collaboration of unions representing city workers, has begun to impose severe cuts in workers' wages and benefits in order to make the working class pay for the crisis.

Last Friday, the City Council met with members of the Coalition of LA City Unions, which includes the local chapters of the AFL-CIO, Service Employees International Union (SEIU), American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the Teamsters. After the meeting the mayor said the coalition had accepted "real" givebacks and boasted, "The people will feel these concessions in the pocketbook."

The concessions include what is being called an Early Retirement Incentive Package, or ERIP. The scheme had originally offered workers a \$15,000-\$30,000 incentive to retire five years early. The payoff has now been delayed for a year or more and workers must contribute an additional 0.37 percent of their paychecks to cover the cost of their own buyout. Workers who accept the ERIP must also pay an additional 1 percent of their monthly pension to cover the cost.

Another key component of the concessions agreement is the elimination of all cost-of-living increases for city workers.

The budget package also includes \$78 million in so-called "hard concessions." While the details of these concessions have yet to be publicly released, the *Los Angeles Times* says the list includes strict rules on overtime pay along with the imposition of a 50 percent pay cut on the 10 holidays per year city workers are allowed to take.

Like their counterparts at the state level, the city

administration is implementing wage and benefit cuts through unpaid furloughs and reduced holidays—presenting this as a less onerous method of slashing labor costs. In fact, it is a substantial reduction in the living standards of workers. The implementation of three unpaid furlough days per month by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, for example, has resulted in a net reduction in pay of approximately 14 percent for state workers.

The 6,400 city workers who belong to the Engineers and Architects Association (EAA), which is not part of the Coalition of LA City Unions, will be required to take 26 unpaid furlough days per year. These furloughs will be devastating, not only for the workers themselves, but for the public that will be hit by reductions in services already depleted by decades of budget cuts.

The nation's second largest city will now have fewer resources and workers at its disposal to repair its dangerously outdated infrastructure. The city experienced 34 water main blowouts during the month of September alone, not to mention the massive damage caused by frequent wildfires on the city's outskirts.

One such water main break, which occurred in the Los Angeles suburb of Valley Village, caused a large sinkhole, which swallowed up half of a fire truck that had responded to the scene. Another blowout in the suburb of Studio City—caused by the bursting of a water main that had been installed prior to the First World War—resulted in flooded homes and businesses.

The unions have unhesitatingly agreed to all of the concessions, despite the fact that Villaraigosa had earlier promised them that the cuts would be limited to the ERIP. Councilman and former LA Police Chief Bernard Parks, now a multimillionaire, claimed in early September that the ERIP was dead and that drastic

measures had to be taken to avoid bankruptcy. Mayor Villaraigosa followed suit, prompting the unions to complain that they hadn't been consulted earlier to help carry out the "hard decisions" to overcome the budget crisis.

In a statement posted on its web site, officials from the Engineers and Architects Association responded to Parks' comments: "Unfortunately, what he [Parks] says is probably true and it mirrors the position that EAA has taken all along: that the ERIP costs too much to help the City, the City has a spending problem, and the longer the City Council puts off making the hard decisions, the more drastic the decisions must be."

After originally saying he would achieve cost savings by the early retirement package alone, Villaraigosa declared that he would veto any agreement that did not include far more sweeping concessions than the buyout program alone. In a recent press conference he claimed there was overwhelming public support for cutting workers' wages. In reality, there is widespread opposition to such measures, except within the corporate and political establishment.

The mayor began his political career as field organizer for the United Teachers of Los Angeles and as president of the Los Angeles chapter of the American Federation of Government Employees. His attack on city workers is the logical outcome of the transformation of the unions into instruments of the corporations and government, as well as the anti-working-class character of the Democratic Party.

The mayor also served on Barack Obama's Transition Economic Advisory Board. His attack on city workers is in line with the efforts by the Obama administration to exploit the economic crisis to destroy long-standing achievements of the working class. While handing trillions to Wall Street, the White House has rejected any serious aid to bankrupt states like California, which is experiencing the worst unemployment rate since 1940.

In this, the two parties of big business are counting on the active support of the unions, which can no longer be considered organizations of the working class in any meaningful sense. The treacherous role of the Los Angeles city unions during these latest negotiations confirms this fact.

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers to vote down the concessions agreement at the ratification

meetings being held in less than three weeks. City workers should form rank-and-file committees, in collaboration with all public and private sector workers, in order to break the stranglehold of these organizations and conduct a struggle against the Democratic Party and the corporate interests it represents.



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