

Los Angeles: Budget crisis used to press attack against city workers

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The Los Angeles, California city government, facing a \$457 million shortfall, is demanding that its 19,000-member workforce accept further drastic cuts to pay and benefits. The cuts would be part of a proposed agreement between the city and the Los Angeles Coalition of City Unions (LACCU), which is working with Democratic Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to implement the cuts.

The agreement consists of a four percent salary cut, the permanent freezing of subsidies to retiree health care at 2011 levels, a four percent increase in employee contribution to retirement health care costs and an increase in city worker pension contributions. Annual cost of living increases for workers' wages will also be frozen.

Villaraigosa, a former union organizer, has threatened that if the deal is not passed, he will impose more than seven weeks, or 36 working days, of unpaid furloughs, for an overall pay cut of approximately 14 percent. "I've had discussions with other union leaders, and I see a path to getting agreements across the board," Villaraigosa said. "But as I said, if the bargaining units choose not to approve this, we'll just have to move ahead with 36 days of furloughs."

The proposed budgetary agreement also includes the elimination of cash overtime for city workers, an additional 1.5 percent salary decrease in exchange for an extended Christmas holiday, the elimination of several hundred positions, most likely leading to layoffs, and cuts to police and fire services. Incredibly, the plan purports to cut \$100 million from the city's 10,000-strong police force without laying off a single officer.

Also in the budget plan are measures to shrink the deficit through funding swaps, building leases and bond sales. One such funding swap under consideration

would be the procurement of more than \$250 million from the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

The rosy claims from city hall that savings made enacting vicious austerity against city workers will be used to fix potholes and expand library services are completely bogus. It is not a question of "if" further austerity will be required for the population of Los Angeles but "how soon."

In passing these attacks against the working class, the mayor and the city council are relying upon the willing collaboration of both the mainstream media and the trade unions.

The LACCU has openly campaigned for workers to vote for cuts. Even the most tepid, pro-forma criticism of the mayor's plan cannot be found on the trade union's website. Instead, the union is asking workers to share their own ideas about how to find operational efficiencies on the job to fix the budget.

Like the United Teachers of Los Angeles, which provides little more than helpful individual advice for teachers who have received pink slips, the coalition is nothing more than a self-help service for the membership to cope with the attack in which the union is participating.

As for the media, an article in Monday's *Los Angeles Times* by David Zahniser portrays the latest agreement as a vehicle through which a portion of city workers can exact vengeance on their brothers who have thus far been exempted from furloughs due to the critical nature of their positions. These attempts to create false divisions among city workers were in line with the mayor's proposal itself. The mayor's threatened furlough order enacts 36 furlough days against those workers who have received cost of living adjustments, while workers who have not received adjustments would only receive 26.

While the *Times* pushes for “shared sacrifice” among the working class, an April 24 editorial declares that more cuts will be needed even if union members do pass the agreement. The newspaper, which takes great pride in the volumes of material it produces to attack workers, arrogantly suggests that Coalition members endorse the agreement, while claiming that, “even if they [city workers] do, that probably won’t be enough to spare the city more budget heartache down the road.”

In order to underscore the point and make its own reactionary contribution to the ongoing budget debate in California, the newspaper released the results of a poll conducted with the University of Southern California depicting a majority of respondents approving the enactment of spending cuts and regressive tax increases to fix the state’s budget crisis. Nowhere in the poll, and entirely absent from the current budget debate in both Los Angeles and Sacramento, is the notion that the wealthy and the large banks and hedge funds be held responsible for the crisis they created.



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