

Connecticut state workers reject union-backed concessions

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The state government of Connecticut has been thrown into a political as well as fiscal crisis, following the June 24 announcement that the state's 45,000 state employees have rejected a \$1.6 billion concessions contract negotiated by the State Employees Bargaining Agent Coalition (SEBAC) with the administration of newly elected Democratic Governor Dannel Malloy.

Malloy told a news conference last Friday that he would proceed immediately with the 7,500 layoffs he had threatened in the event of the rejection of the contract. Unspecified other cutbacks are also in the offing.

The rejection vote is a huge repudiation of the coalition of 15 unions and, more broadly, the role of the trade unions and their alliance with the budget-cutting Wall Street representatives of the Democratic Party.

The deal, announced in mid-May, was trumpeted as a "win-win" arrangement in which state workers had been granted unprecedented mercy from the "pro-labor" governor. In exchange for a four-year no-layoff promise they were ordered to accept enormous givebacks, including a two-year wage freeze and major concessions on pensions and health care benefits.

The Connecticut agreement was part of a national trend in which Democratic governors, as in neighboring New York, have worked out budget cutting deals with the collaboration of the trade unions, advancing the argument that the interests of business and the local economy would be best served by obtaining the cooperation of the union bureaucrats, rather than dispensing with their services, as advocated by Republican leaders in Wisconsin and elsewhere.

Under long-established voting rules, the concessions deal in Connecticut required acceptance by 14 out of

the 15 member unions of the statewide coalition, including at least 80 percent of those voting. The concessions were rejected on both levels, with two major employee units and about 40 percent of state workers voting against.

The largest of the voting units, American Federation of State County and Municipal Workers Council 4, representing more than one-third of the affected employees, voted against the contract by 55 percent. Also rejecting it was the 4,500-member Connecticut Employees Union Independent, a Service Employees International Union affiliate representing cooks, custodians, maintenance workers and others.

The rank and file workers defied enormous pressures to reject the concessions. The governor made clear that layoffs would follow a no vote. In the attempt to ram through the concessions deal, the state's legislature approved a budget which assumed that \$1.6 billion out of a \$2 billion deficit would be paid for through givebacks by state workers—before any of them were allowed to vote on the concessions deal.

Republican politicians attacked the agreement as a giveaway to the unions and their members. Newspaper editorialists and politicians explained that rejection would mean that state workers had taken leave of their senses.

The New York Times summed up official opinion, as well as the national significance it attached to securing approval of this deal, in a front page article several weeks ago that focused on the comparison between Connecticut and Wisconsin, labeling Connecticut the most labor-friendly state in the US.

The Connecticut workers, whose interests were represented neither by the unions nor by the big business parties or the media, had a very different view of the concessions package. They clearly saw no

essential difference between Wisconsin and Connecticut, between Republican and Democratic enemies.

The *Times* quoted a state social worker, Emma Brooks. “The unions do not really want to hear our thoughts and answer our questions. They want to skim over the deal and tell us to vote for it,” she said, adding that she was prepared to face the threat of layoff. “If I lose my job, I won’t lose my integrity,” she declared.

Several state employees told the *Hartford Courant* that they were fed up with being told to endlessly sacrifice while the bankers and hedge fund managers raked in amounts that would cover the entire state budget gap many times over. Retiree Gina Herboldt said, “Every time there’s a budget crisis, they blame the state employees. Why do they always go after the little guy? How much more can we give back?”

The workers’ rejection has provoked angry outbursts from leading state politicians. The president pro tem of the State Senate, Donald Williams, issued a statement arrogantly claiming that “the failure to ratify by state employees does more harm to them and the cause of labor than anything their enemies could possibly achieve.”

Governor Malloy, who has said he will not reopen negotiations, held an emergency meeting last Friday with the mayors of the state’s five largest cities, including Hartford, New Haven, Waterbury, Bridgeport and Stamford. He told a press conference that he was moving “full steam ahead” with plans to lay off 7,500 workers. “I have a big job to do and we’re going to do it,” he added, explaining that any delay in implementing the layoffs will only increase the eventual number that will have to be carried out.

A special session of the state legislature is scheduled for June 30, with the governor expected to call for “rescission authority,” which would give him the ability to impose cutbacks, including potentially devastating cuts in aid to the state’s struggling cities, without legislative action.

The voting result is only a pale reflection of the anger building up among state employees in Connecticut and within the entire working class. There is little doubt that the vote against the concessions would have been overwhelming if not for the blackmail threat of layoffs and the huge propaganda campaign designed to convince them that they had absolutely no alternative.

The unions know they are sitting on a powder keg, and it is unclear whether they will attempt to engineer some kind of revote or even the rewriting of the voting rules to allow passage by a simple majority. The union coalition has called a meeting for Monday June 27 to discuss its next moves.

The struggle in Connecticut, together with similar battles elsewhere, is just beginning. The growing anger among every section of the working class raises the urgent need for an independent political struggle and the building of a leadership that puts an end to the total disenfranchisement of the working class by the big business political system and the trade union apparatus. The real voice of workers, finding first expression in the repudiation of the statewide concessions deal, must now proceed to the establishment of democratic committees that will conduct a real fight against the social counterrevolution demanded by capitalism today.



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