California transit workers reject union-backed contract

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Transit workers in San Francisco, California overwhelmingly rejected a concessions contract on Wednesday, supported by both the Transit Workers Union (TWU) and the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA).

The June 8 vote of 994-488 on a contract for over 2,000 transit workers reflects the immense opposition among workers to the demand that they be forced to pay for the economic crisis. It is the third time in the last year and a half that workers rejected a deal supported by the union.

Workers faced an effective pay cut through a three-year wage freeze. Other items in the proposal included: hiring of part-time operators equal to 15 percent of the total workforce, changing work rules to reduce overtime pay and allow for a 40 hour week (an effective pay cut), eliminating a provision that allows unlicensed operators to remain on the payroll, and extending the length of time that SFMTA may conduct disciplinary investigations of employees.

In addition the contract would make it more difficult for workers to make health and safety complaints about their conditions and for the public ridership.

Despite their rejection of the contract by a 2-1 margin, the dispute will now go to a binding arbitrator with the power to impose the same deal—or worse. A decision is expected by Tuesday for the contract that will take effect on July 1. The city will not allow any loss in service, and news reports suggest that the terms will be favorable to the management's requests. These conditions are part of Proposition G, which was pushed through last year after workers rejected previous concessions.

The monetary value of the contract concessions agreed by the union was unclear in the run-up to the vote. When the initial agreement was reached last week, savings were estimated at $7 million a year, or $21 million over three years. It did not include an explicit pay cut and some other concessions, and fell short of the SFMTA's previous goal of $26 million in cuts.

On Tuesday night, however, the SFMTA released figures indicating that the savings would be $38 million over three years, and this does not include the $8 million saved from the pay freeze.

The last minute announcement raised justified concerns among transit workers that the union had agreed to far more concessions than it was letting on. TWU Local 250-A President Rafael Cabrera responded by complaining that the management announcement had "created a sense of mistrust and confusion that was hard to overcome."

The transit union has a history of collaborating with management in an effort to force transit workers to accept pay cuts and other concessions. In February 2010, workers were asked to pay in an additional $8.9 million to their pensions, and accept rules that would limit overtime work. At that time, workers spurned the cost cutting measures by the city. The additional payment to their pensions would have effectively slashed workers paychecks and set a precedent for future cuts.

For their part, the union management and leaders of the San Francisco Labor Council (SFLC) have attempted to once again pit other public and private workers against the transit workers.

In speaking of the demand for wage freezes, givebacks and other cuts in employee benefits, Tim Paulson, executive director of the SFLC, applauded unions throughout the city for agreeing to concessions "I am mightily proud of every union in San Francisco that has engaged in that effort," Paulson said, according

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to a *San Francisco Chronicle* article.

The incumbent mayor of San Francisco, Democrat Edwin Lee, has recently introduced a pension reform ballot measure to cut worker pensions, part of an attack on government pensions being pushed by California Governor Jerry Brown and governors throughout the country, Democrat and Republican.

Lee's measure would cap pension benefits, require greater cost sharing by employees, and require greater employee contributions to the retiree health trust fund. The measure would affect all public employees.

Transit workers are regularly denounced by the city administration and the media for their "fat checks" and their rejection of concessions proposed by the union. They have been the scapegoat for recent increases in transit fares and for being the only major union to vote against the city's cost-saving measures.

This is a fraud. As a point of reference, the richest man in Bay Area, Google co-founder Larry Page, has an estimated net worth of $12 billion. With a personal check amounting to 0.175% of his wealth, Ellison could cover the entire amount saved from the proposed three-year contract.

MUNI workers should be supported by all sections of the working class for their opposition to social cuts. The attack on transit workers is part of an attack on the entire working class in the state. Brown, together with Democratic and Republican legislators in Sacramento, has already imposed billions in cuts to social programs, with billions more threatened.

Throughout the country, both of the parties of big business are on the offensive against the working class. From education to healthcare to public transportation, massive cuts have been made and are being proposed that will drastically reduce the living standard of the majority of the population.

The actions of the Transit Workers Union once again make clear that a struggle to defend the interests of transit workers requires a break with this organization, and the formation of an independent rank-and-file committee. Such a committee must reject all cuts, including those that will be demanded by the arbitrator, make preparations for strike action, and appeal to workers throughout the Bay Area to carry out a joint struggle.

To defend the rights of the working class, including the right to a livable income and the right to public transportation, requires above all a political struggle against both big business parties and the capitalist system they defend.

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