

The Democratic Party and the assault on public workers

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Last Thursday, the Democratic-controlled New Jersey Assembly passed a sweeping package of pension and health care cuts and attacks on government workers' bargaining rights drawn up by Republican Governor Chris Christie. Leaders of the state Senate, also controlled by the Democrats, said they would quickly adopt the same bill and send it to the governor's desk to be signed into law.

The bill affects 750,000 public sector workers and retirees. The *New York Times* summed up its contents as follows:

"The legislation will sharply increase what state and local workers must contribute for their health insurance and pensions, suspend cost-of-living increases to retirees' pension checks, raise retirement ages and curb the unions' contract bargaining rights. It will save local and state government \$132 billion over the next 30 years, by the administration's estimate, and give the troubled benefit systems a sounder financial footing, mostly by shifting costs onto workers."

New Jersey government workers will soon be paying several thousands dollars more per year into the benefit funds. The bill also strips workers of the right to negotiate over health benefits, allowing the state to impose health care terms unilaterally.

One day later, the Democratic governor of Connecticut, Dannel Malloy, threatened to lay off thousands of state workers and unilaterally impose massive spending cuts. This was his response to the rejection by the rank and file of the state's largest public sector union of a concessions contract agreed to by the union leadership.

Malloy had worked closely with the unions to craft a budget that depended on the acceptance by state workers of a two-year wage freeze and significant increases in pension and health care costs. The

governor said he would now move "full steam ahead" with plans to lay off up to 7,500 workers.

These two events underscore the basic political fact that the Democratic and Republican parties are united in support of a historic assault on the conditions of the working class in the United States.

The New Jersey legislation in many respects goes even further than the anti-worker measures passed earlier this year by Republican Governor Scott Walker in Wisconsin, which set off the largest working class demonstrations in the US in decades.

Walker had a Republican-controlled legislature. New Jersey Governor Christie, who has made his name by baiting public workers, relied on the Democratic leadership of both legislative chambers to supply the needed votes. These include Senate President Stephen Sweeney, who is an official of the ironworkers union.

The unions in both Connecticut and New Jersey—as in Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, California, New York and other states where Democratic as well as Republican governors are pushing through historic attacks on public workers—have demonstrated a combination of complicity and impotence. Their betrayal is bound up with their role in subordinating the working class to the Democratic Party and opposing any independent political movement of working people.

In New Jersey, which has one of the highest unionization rates in the country, the unions responded to the explosive anger of workers across the state by refusing even to call a strike, insisting instead that workers plead with the Democratic leaders to drop their support for Christie's bill. This was under conditions where the governor's poll numbers had plunged as a result of popular opposition to his attacks on social services and government workers.

These developments explode the efforts of the left-

liberal fraternity around the *Nation* magazine and pseudo-socialist groups such as the International Socialist Organization (ISO) to present the unions as fighting organizations of the working class and the Democrats as fundamentally different from the Republicans.

In Wisconsin, even as the unions and the Democrats agreed to Governor Walker's demands for vicious cuts in wages, benefits and social services, the ISO presented the fight as a battle against "anti-union" Republicans and described the Democrats as being on the side of the working class.

The events in New Jersey and Connecticut expose more clearly than ever the reactionary and duplicitous politics of these forces. They play a vital role in suppressing the struggles of the working class and blocking the development of an independent political movement against both big business parties and the capitalist system which they defend.

The wave of budget cuts and attacks on government workers is being spearheaded by the Obama White House, which is negotiating an agreement with the Republicans to impose trillions of dollars in cuts in basic social programs such as Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security. Both parties are carrying out the policy of the ruling class, which is to impose the full cost of the breakdown of the capitalist system on the working class.

This entails the permanent destruction of the social gains achieved over more than a century of struggle. It is a counterrevolution in the social conditions of the vast majority of the population.

The Socialist Equality Party completely rejects the entire framework of the so-called budget debate. It is premised on a lie—that there is "no money" for jobs, decent wages and basic social services. Aside from the trillions that are expended on imperialist wars, the wealth of society is systematically plundered by the financial-corporate elite.

Aided and abetted by Obama, the financial aristocracy is utilizing the crisis to further enrich itself and monopolize even more of the nation's wealth. Hedge fund managers make more in one year than the budget deficits of entire states. A recent report showed that the richest 0.01 percent of the country, some 15,000 people, took in more than 5 percent of national income in 2008, a five-fold increase since the 1970s.

There is no solution to the crisis for the working class outside of a mass, independent political movement to expropriate the wealth of the ruling elite and transform the major banks and corporations into public enterprises run for the common good, not private profit. This is the fight for socialism.

We urge workers to reject all calls for "sacrifice" and concessions. Throw off the dead hand of the unions and establish genuinely democratic rank-and-file committees of struggle to unite all sections of working people against layoffs, wage cuts, foreclosures and budget cuts!

The most critical issue is the building of a new revolutionary leadership to arm the coming mass struggles of the working class with a socialist program and perspective. We call on all those looking for a way to fight the attacks of the Obama administration, the two big business parties and the corporate bosses to join the Socialist Equality Party.

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