

Connecticut workers oppose union-backed concessions

A reporting team
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Connecticut state union leaders met Friday and announced that they were determined to find a way to impose the \$1.6 billion concessions deal they had agreed to with Governor Dannel Malloy, but that had been rejected in a rank-and-file vote.

The unionized state employees follow a procedure in which contracts are accepted only if 80 percent of those voting, and 14 out of 15 unions represented in the statewide coalition, agree to the terms. In fact, more than 40 percent of the workers, and several of the larger unions, voted against the givebacks. (See, “Connecticut state workers reject union-backed concessions”)

This opposition, and the knowledge that the “no” vote would have been overwhelming if not for the blackmail threat of layoffs and the complete surrender of the unions to the Democratic governor, undoubtedly played a role in the decision of the union officials, as of now, not to seek a revote or overturn the result.

“We’re not looking behind,” said Matt O’Connor, a spokesman for the State Employee Bargaining Agent Coalition. “We’re looking ahead. Everyone will know more next week... We’re not changing the vote that has already taken place.”

The union officials are trying to wear down the opposition, working together with the governor to threaten workers with layoffs, although state employees were well aware of that threat when they cast their ballots. The unions have some weeks in order to work toward this end. The governor must submit his proposed budget cuts on July 15, and the legislature has until August 30 to hold hearings and make decisions on budget provisions.

The state legislature convened for a special session Thursday and voted to give the governor greater authority to cut the budget and to order layoffs without going through the legislative branch. Malloy issued a statement in the early morning of the beginning of the new fiscal year that underlined his aims and made crystal clear whom he represents. He was quoted as follows in the *Hartford Courant*: “Our goal has been achieved: Connecticut has a budget in place that is balanced honestly, with no gimmicks... Putting Connecticut on firm fiscal footing—which is what we’ve done—sends an important, much-needed message to the business community and to Wall Street.”

Speaking at a news conference later that day, Malloy also reiterated his earlier threats. “I’ve been asked many times over the past few days about rumors regarding [the unions] and what they might or might not do, so let me be clear,” he said. “If they choose to ratify the agreement that was recently turned down, and if they do so in a timely fashion, much of the pain that’s been inflicted

over the past few days can be reversed. If they end up not ratifying the agreement, then the budget we now have in place is the one we’ll live with for the next two years.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to state workers and others in the capital of Hartford as well as in the city of Mansfield about the issues raised by the struggle against concessions.

Jeff Bayliss is a professor of Japanese history at Trinity College in Connecticut. He told the *WSWS*, “I understand there is a need to balance the budget, but they are saying it all needs to be done through cuts. I find this a little bit obnoxious to say the least. On the national level they won’t consider raising taxes to the level they were under Reagan.

“In Connecticut, it is a microcosm of what is happening on the national level. Although I haven’t lived here that long, I am surprised that Malloy is taking the stance he is, especially since he is taking on unilateral powers to carry out layoffs and budget cuts. This seems to be a trend in American politics: they believe in democracy until they really need to get things done. Then they take on unilateral powers with an authoritarian cast. And this is the Democratic Party.

“The public unions are focused on how to make concessions. They say this is because their salary and benefit compensation are better than private industry, which is not really true. But in presenting it this way, what they are doing is getting the little guys to fight among themselves and cut each other’s throats.

“One guy I overheard arguing against the freeze and health care cuts [in the concessions agreed by the union] said when you give something up you start down a slippery slope that you can’t recover from, and you will end up losing more and more.

“I am worried about the direction we are going in and the differentiation of wealth. We have had the moment of a great economic crisis like the 1930s and the chance to deal with the rich, but it has been turned into its opposite where more is being taken away from the people who have little to start with.”

Clarivel Martinez, a bus driver for 20 years, spoke for the state workers, “I think these takeaways from the state workers are bad. We are having the same thing. We haven’t had to pay for medical care for 19 years since I have been on the job. Now they are making us pay for our medical insurance.

“I live in Manchester where I bought my home ten years ago. Now I can’t pay for it because the light, the heat and the taxes are all going up. My wages are OK, but they don’t keep up with the cost of living. Then I ran into problems paying for everything, but

the banks and creditors really won't help me out.”

Kimblia Gillispie, an unemployed retail worker, commented, “What is happening with the budget cuts and the state workers is unfair. I am sure they could find other ways to pay off the budget deficit. I think the rich should be taxed for this. They have enough money. It won't affect them. My grandmother just had her hours cut. She has worked for a long time at a ruler factory in Bloomfield. More people are being affected.”

John Baker is retired now after working for 30 years, from 1975 until 2006, in the state Labor Department as a member of AFSCME. “The section of the unions that is most opposed to Malloy's cuts is the AFSCME workers in addition to the prison guards. The concessions are unpalatable to the rank and file. It is a wage freeze for two years, and the end of longevity pay. As I see it, it is probably the older workers with greater seniority who oppose this and the younger workers who face being laid off.

“This will hurt the delivery of social services. Malloy has ordered 280 to be laid off from providing welfare benefits in the Department of Social Services. There will be other departments that will be hit very hard as well.

“In addition, the state of Connecticut will suffer a major loss of another 5,000 jobs. The state economy will decline, and we are in a precarious position already. Nationally, the economy is also in a precarious state.

“The financial crisis in Connecticut has come from the tax revenues not measuring up. But Malloy is not raising taxes on those people who have wealth because that would cause a backlash. Tax increases are what the Republicans would raise against them.

“Tax increases against the wealthy would inflame the Connecticut media, but benefit cuts, wage freezes and layoffs of state workers would not bother the likes of the *Hartford Courant*, the anti-worker, anti-state employee, anti-wages increase newspaper.

“The level of inequality is high in Connecticut. Look at the poverty in Hartford and Bridgeport. Schools were put into receivership in Willimantic near here this year. The principal and all his administrators had their jobs eliminated. The town tried to keep him as principal. There was mass support for him at the public meetings they held, but they did the wrong thing and got rid of him anyway.

“The perception of a division between public and private workers is something they are trying to promote. The fact of the matter is that there are highly educated and highly paid professors, nurses and other professionals among the state workforce.

“While the whole apparatus of media propaganda is against them, there is a problem with the workers' leadership. The public employee unions are contributing to this division. For instance at Electric Boat, wages have been cut and work locations have been shut down. The unions never tried to unite private and public workers there. The public unions have held themselves apart with the idea that we are not the same as they are facing layoffs and workplace closures.

“The unions are not unions in any sense of the word now. Managers are part of the unions. The unions have been part of the state administration. They stabilized things.

“The relation between the unions and the Democratic Party is the relationship the unions have with the state apparatus. It is a unity with the corporate state. The social identity of the unions is taking on the interests and identity of the state which is for the very wealthy in Connecticut. The Republicans have made some layoffs, but now the Democrats have moved in and taken over every policy of the Republicans. The financial support of both of the parties comes from the wealthy, plus the Democrats are supported by the unions.”

Joe Eichner, who has been a teacher and a state worker for 15 years, said, “The \$1.6 billion they are trying to take from us didn't happen as a budget deficit overnight. Why do they have to take it now? Why do they have to take it this way? Why do they have to take it from us?”

“I am in the SVFT, the State Vocational Federation of Teachers. My wife is in AFSCME. I know why we voted “no” on the union contract. The healthcare is worthless. It is only good if you have a heart attack. They are ruining our health care, and they have already taken a two-year wage freeze from us before they are asking for another two-year freeze.

“We have a great gang we call a union, and when things get tough, they will throw you under the bus. My union rep was telling me how we could get rid of 20% of our workforce and keep on working. Unions have always been for the Democratic Party. They told us to vote for Malloy. I didn't.

“I am paying 23% on my income taxes. Donald Trump should be paying that too, but he is not. The Indian tribes at Mohican Sun and Foxwoods are contributing their fair share of taxes. Why can't the 11 billionaires in Connecticut? I'll tell you why not. They are a seat above God.

“In feudal times the tax collector went around and collected taxes from all the peasants. It all went into the castle where the nobility consumed it. It is like that with the billionaires today. They take all the taxes into their castle, and they consume it all. They are the ones who are ruling the country, and they make all the rules. Their rules are to lower their taxes. Then they lower our wages and cut our jobs.

“It seems like the Democrats are supposed to be for the working class and the Republicans for big business. But what is the difference really? They are both the same.”



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