New York State employee union surrenders to layoff threat

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The leadership of the Public Employees Federation (PEF), the second largest state employee union in New York State, announced this past Saturday that it has agreed to contract terms very similar to those accepted last month by the larger Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA). The PEF represents 54,000 mostly white collar workers. The terms of the proposed contracts, which have yet to be ratified by the memberships of either union, include drastic concessions compared to the previous agreements, which expired at the end of March.

The five-year contract proposal features a three-year wage freeze followed by 2 percent increases in each of the last two years. It also imposes a total of nine unpaid furlough days (called "deficit reduction leave"), and significant increases in the cost of health insurance coverage. While the unions have excused their surrender by pointing to the presence of a no-layoff pledge in the contract, significantly this pledge covers only the first two of the contract's five years.

The administration of Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo is using the threat of mass layoffs, up to 9,800, in an attempt to cow state workers into accepting these attacks. This is part of the broader assault on the working class embodied in Cuomo's recently passed state budget, which slashes a broad range of social services, including education and health care, while protecting the interests of the wealthiest state residents.

Cuomo, backed by the Democrats and Republicans in the state legislature, is carrying out the same sort of destruction of social programs and employee benefits that is being pushed at the state and federal level across the country. Politicians of both capitalist parties are using every means at their disposal to make workers pay for the economic crisis triggered by the reckless speculation and profiteering of the financial and corporate elite.

While the Republicans undertake the most naked assaults, as for example in Wisconsin and Ohio, the Democrats have sought to employ the collaboration of the unions to achieve the same ends.

Whatever the tactical differences between the two big business parties, they rapidly disappear when workers begin to resist. In Connecticut, where state employees recently rejected a concessions contract worked out between the unions and the Democratic governor, layoff notices have been issued. The union bureaucrats, working in tandem with Governor Dannel Malloy, now plan to hold another vote under changed voting procedures, which they hope will enable them to impose the cutbacks.

In New York State, the Democratic governor has adopted hard-nosed tactics to enforce his demands. Following the CSEA leadership's acceptance of the proposed contract terms, the Cuomo administration began weekly announcements of planned layoffs of PEF members—541 the first week and 321 the second. The anticipated third round of notices was cancelled and the previous layoffs suspended when the agreement with the PEF leadership was announced. Cuomo has made clear that the layoffs will be reinstated, however, if the union membership fails to accept the proposed contracts.

While the PEF leadership put up a small show of resistance, waiting an additional month after the leaders of CSEA had accepted Cuomo's terms before capitulating, in the end the story was the same.

Both unions claimed that this was the best they could do under the circumstances. Kenneth Brynien, PEF

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president, issued a statement claiming the contract was "a difficult agreement to reach, but with our members' jobs in peril and the state's fiscal hardship we've stepped up and made the necessary sacrifices."

The New York State workers will be voting in coming weeks on whether to accept the concessions. CSEA ballots are due to be counted on August 15, but PEF members will not begin voting until mid-August.

Anger is growing over the destruction of living standards. Posts on the website of the *Times Union*, the major newspaper in Albany, the state capital, indicate large and growing opposition from CSEA and PEF members.

In a front page article this week, *The New York Times* laid out in some detail the determination of the CSEA and PEF bureaucrats to force acceptance of these concessions-laden contracts.

The political establishment is acutely aware that it is facing a potential explosion. The *Times* quotes Cuomo as saying, "I'm confident, but it is crazy out there, and would I guarantee anything right now? No."

"Union leaders are leaving nothing to chance," the *Times* reports approvingly. The CSEA is sending a special mailing to its 66,000 members, before sending out the ballots themselves, warning of "massive layoffs" if the contract is rejected.

According to the *Times*, "The reaction of rank-and-file members is a test both for union leaders [of CSEA and PEF], who are trying to protect jobs in a political climate that is increasingly hostile to public employees, and for Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, who is trying to rein in spending without alienating labor, a traditional Democratic constituency." The newspaper goes on to report, with undisguised relief, that no "organized opposition…has emerged" within the CSEA or PEF.

The *Times* and the ruling class for which it speaks are clearly relying on the unions to play the key role in rolling back living standards and working conditions. There is absolutely no reason to believe that the concessions included in these tentative agreements, if they are adopted, will put an end to the assault on state workers. With the end of the federal economic stimulus and continuing deterioration of the national and global economy, state and local governments across the country will be undertaking ever-greater attacks.

The fact that the proposed contracts permit layoffs after the first two years should be taken as a clear indication of what is to come. Furthermore, Cuomo told the *Times* in a recent interview that his top priority for next year will be cutting pension benefits for state and city workers.

The struggle facing state workers in New York, Connecticut and elsewhere is just beginning. Especially under the present conditions, acceptance of concessions will only lead to deeper attacks. The ruling elite and their Democratic and Republican representatives are clear that this is a political struggle, and working people must respond in kind

It is necessary to defy both the Democratic politicians and the unions that falsely claim to represent state workers' interests. The rejection of the concession demands must be seen as the launching pad for an independent political mobilization. CSEA and PEF members should form independent workplace committees to link up with their counterparts in Connecticut as well as with other sections of the working class, advancing a socialist alternative to the budget cuts and concession contracts.

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