

Public employee unions in New York and Connecticut force through takeaway contracts

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Within the past week, public employee unions in both New York State and Connecticut managed to push through contracts that spell sweeping concessions for their members. Democratic governors in the two states managed to impose the kind of takeaways implemented by their Republican counterparts elsewhere by threatening massive layoffs and relying on the unabashed collaboration of the union leaderships.

In New York, Governor Cuomo threatened public workers with nearly ten thousand layoffs if they did not accept contracts with major “give backs,” including a wage freeze during the first three years of a five year contract, nine unpaid “furlough” days, and substantial increases in medical costs (See: “New wave of state worker layoffs begins in New York”). On Monday, the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA), the largest of the state’s public employee unions, announced ratification of the proposed contract by a margin of approximately 59 to 41 percent.

Perhaps an even greater indication of the anger over this contract than the significant “No” vote is the fact that only about 44 percent of the union members returned ballots. Conversations with CSEA members and postings on newspaper web sites clearly indicate substantial dissatisfaction with the contract terms and frustration at the lack alternatives to what was being presented. There are even allegations that the union selectively failed to mail ballots to members who were outspoken in opposition to the contract. When these individuals complained, they were told it was “too late” for the ballots to be sent out and returned in time.

Governor Cuomo praised the union leadership for its collaboration. “I’m pleased that our approach of labor and management working together is vindicated,” he said.

The union’s active promotion of the concessions contract made it clear to the members that they would get absolutely no support should they reject it. The union president, Danny Donohue, stated, “These are not ordinary times, and CSEA worked hard to reach an agreement that we believed would

be in everyone’s best interest.”

The wider labor bureaucracy has wholly endorsed the collaboration by CSEA leaders. Denis Hughes, the president of the New York State AFL-CIO, stated, “At a time when collective bargaining is under attack all over the country the CSEA vote demonstrates that collective bargaining can work for the common good.”

The protection against layoffs supposedly bought at the price of steep concessions in wages and benefits is entirely illusory. While the immediate layoff of thousands has been avoided, at least for the first union to accept the agreement, the purported layoff protection is only valid for the first two years of the five-year contract. Even this ‘guarantee’ is conditional, since the contract includes an ‘escape clause’ in case of extraordinary circumstances. Furthermore, the state budget included the establishment of the so-called SAGE (Spending and Government Efficiency) commission and other mechanisms tasked with consolidation of state agencies and reduction of their operations. These measures will undoubtedly result in layoffs against which the contract provides no protection.

In contrast to the workers, who directly feel the effects of the concessions being made, the union leaders take “the long view.” CSEA President Donohue stated that this is not the last CSEA contract. “We’ve been at this for 100 years now; we’ll be at this for another 100 years.” A union press release states, “CSEA members agree that this contract is reasonable and responsible for the long term. CSEA will move forward as we always have.” For the union leaders it is continuation of the established relationship with the Democrats that counts, regardless of the effect on the membership.

The Cuomo administration is explicitly using the CSEA contract in an attempt to cow the other state employees with pending contracts into submission. A memo issued by Howard Glaser, the state’s Director of Operations, reiterates the threat to resume the thousands of suspended and planned layoffs of Public Employee Federation (PEF) members if they do not accept a contract nearly identical to that of the CSEA. PEF is the state’s second largest public employee

union and its leadership has accepted a contract nearly identical to that of CSEA. Referring to other public employee unions, including the UUP, which represents State University of New York faculty, and NYSCOB, which represents some elements of the state police, Glaser stated, "... despite repeated attempts by the State, these units have been slow to engage in negotiations and at this point in the year we think it is unlikely that layoffs can be avoided."

In Connecticut, the union leadership's collaboration with the Democratic governor was, if anything, even more blatant than in New York. In June, under threat of mass layoffs, a the members of a coalition of 15 state employee unions, the State Employees Bargaining Agent Coalition (SEBAC), rejected a proposed contract which contained major concessions in compensation (See: "Connecticut governor, unions to make state workers revoke on concessions deal").

This rejection was based on a pre-existing agreement amongst the unions that, an adoption of contracts required that 14 of the 15 unions had to individually pass the contract proposal with a majority vote and that those unions represent at least 80 percent of the combined workforce. In the June vote, a small majority (57 percent) of the combined votes of all the unions was in favor, but only 11 of the individual unions had majorities in favor. The contract was, therefore, rejected.

The large 'No' vote, even after intense pressure for acceptance from the union bureaucracy and under the threat of mass layoffs by the governor, indicates that the degree of opposition amongst the rank and file was substantial. Many of those who voted 'yes' did so only to protect their own jobs and those of their fellow workers.

Democratic Governor Dannel Malloy had trumpeted the original proposal as a model of the positive results (i.e. evisceration of workers' pay and benefits) which could be achieved by collaboration with compliant union bureaucrats in contrast with the acrimony engendered by the confrontational tactics of Republican governors in, for example, Wisconsin and Ohio. In both New York and Connecticut, the velvet glove of 'collaboration' was only a cover for the mailed fist of mass layoffs. The initial rejection of the contract proposal threw that narrative into crisis and posed a threat to the close relationship between the union bureaucrats and the Democratic Party.

Immediately, the union leaderships, instead of taking the result of the vote as a directive to make a radical change in course, began thrashing about to find some mechanism to overturn the outcome. Ultimately, they decided simply to change the rules so that a majority vote in only eight unions was needed for acceptance. This was combined with the clear message to the union memberships that their leaders would mount absolutely no struggle against the threatened

layoffs should the contract again be rejected. In a coordinated attack, Governor Malloy began issuing thousands of layoff notices (3,000 were sent out and 2,000 more were pending), which would take effect if the contract were to be voted down.

In the end then, it is no surprise that, left leaderless and unprotected against the threat of mass layoffs, the workers voted to accept what was essentially the same contract they had previously rejected. In a measure of continuing discontent, however, only 35,000 out of a total of over 45,000 union members voted in the second election.

The thoroughgoing collusion of the union bureaucracy allowed Malloy to state, "...unlike in most other states, we did it without going to war with public employees." Union leaders' pronouncements have been in complete concert with this bald-faced lie. Ron McLellan, one of the union presidents, stated in a news conference, "Disaster has been averted, and we are on solid ground to regroup and go forward...The billionaires and the large corporations who have targeted public-service workers across the country do not always win." There was jubilation among union leaders when passage was announced, according to the *Hartford Courant*.

The actual sentiment of the workers was summed up by Robert Mills, a state worker quoted in the *New York Times*. "The whole thing is dirty and unjust, plain and simple." He voted against the deal in June but in favor of it this time. "The government is using intimidation and scare tactics to force people to do what they want."

He added, "I did it [voted yes this time] because the threatening and bullying by the governor worked. I don't want to lose my job; I don't want my friends to lose their jobs."

It is unclear whether all of the planned layoffs and budget cuts will now be rescinded.



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