

New York State workers speak out against concessions contracts

A WSWS reporting team
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The WSWS recently spoke with New York State workers on the capital mall in Albany about their views regarding the proposed contracts with the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA) and Public Employees Federation (PEF). CSEA members recently voted to accept the proposed agreement under the threat of mass layoffs and capitulation by the union leadership (see “Public employee unions in New York and Connecticut force through takeaway contracts”). PEF members will vote on a nearly identical contract in September.

The governors of New York and Connecticut, seconded by the big business media, hailed the concession agreements as a triumph of “cooperation” with the unions. In contrast, all the workers we spoke with expressed opposition to the contracts and anger toward the unions for accepting drastic cuts in wages and benefits.

Mary, who has worked for 30 years at the Department of Health explained, “I am not afraid. I am angry. I do not face the danger of being laid off myself, although my brother is newer and could get laid off. I do not want to lose my salary. With the furlough days and health insurance increases, it might be \$10,000. I don’t want to be worse off at the end of the contract. I want to be better off.

“The Governor’s office refused to negotiate with the unions. Someone from the American Arbitration Association said to me that the union tried to modify the Governor’s proposed contract but the Governor’s office would not even look at it. I will vote No.

“Why is New York State PEF President paid \$206,000 yet my modest income that I worked thirty years to get is to be cut? But the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. There are no tax increases for them but my expenses keep going up.”

Regina Blakemore, who also works at the Health Department, said, “I have seen the numbers. We’ll have lower salaries after they finish with health insurance and cost of living going up. I really don’t agree with it. I think they could find the money other places--tax the rich. I don’t think it should be on the backs of the working class.”

“I used to work at CSEA, right in the union. I think their interest is in saving their political face and make sure they stay friends with the governor. We don’t even need the unions if the working class would stand together.”

Sandra, a CSEA member, told the WSWS, “I voted against the contract basically because they can do better. We are giving up everything, and they are giving us nothing. It has always been, in state contracts, that we get something in return. While it is not the \$5 billion amount of the ‘millionaires’ tax’ Cuomo is giving back to the rich, the ‘little’ sum of \$400 million they are taking from us for a year has no guarantee against layoffs. They say there is a two-year guarantee against layoffs, but if there are the same economic conditions next year as this year, there is no guarantee.

“In addition, the family health care premiums are shooting up 30% for grade 10 workers and above. Some will pay a 31 percent increase for family health care. This will hit pretty hard. There are more questions about why health care insurance is so high for us, including why isn’t there volume discount bargaining with the insurance companies.

“There are a lot of people who are hoping this won’t pass, but they instilled fear in younger workers that they would face layoffs. The Governor instilled this fear with his layoff threats of 4,500 and 4,800 in the two main state unions. However, there are still layoffs coming from each of the agencies that have yet to announce how Cuomo’s 10% cuts to each agency will be put into effect.

“Cuomo is trying to balance the budget on the backs of the workers. There was no negotiation on the questions of a millionaire’s tax. We don’t make big money like the corporations do. They have to go back to the negotiating table. I think the union could do better. This is the first time CSEA and PEF have split for a contract. And they haven’t let us know anything.”

John Orsini is in PEF. He said, “I think the union leaders sold us out. I think they were out to keep union membership up simply because they could collect more union dues. I believe the union would oppose layoffs if we vote this

contract down by trying to negotiate against the Governor.

“Cuomo likes to bully. He threatened layoffs during negotiations to force the hands of the unions. I don’t see Cuomo as fundamentally different from Scott Walker in Wisconsin. Cuomo is attempting to place the blame on the working class for what is the result of poor governorship by the governor and the legislature.

“The worst feature of this contract is the nine days of furlough on top of the wage freeze. It is also bad that the health care premiums are going up about 10% depending on whether you get individual or family coverage and what your civil service status is. This has another negative effect of weakening our unity because it splits up the rank and file by civil service grade and dependents. You are no longer a union if you are not representing the people in the same way.

“There is no layoff protection in this contract. They will be deciding on more layoffs after any contract is accepted, and those 10% agency layoffs will have nothing to do with whatever limited guarantees might be in the contract.

“If something could be done to fight the layoffs, I would be in favor of that. I don’t really think that the union will fight the layoffs. The Governor has played hardball with the unions. He is telling workers to take it or leave it.

“There didn’t seem to be much support for the unions by the liberal Democrats or the legislators representing districts where there are sizeable numbers of civil servants. There are about 110,000 civil service employees. Working people pay taxes, but don’t get equal representation as the rich. I don’t think we are getting good representation at all.”

Nancy Chacho is another PEF state worker who condemned the contract offer. “There is no protection against layoffs in the contract. For the most part, people who have many years seniority in a job title, Cuomo and the agencies can decide to wipe out that job title. This is not just the SAGE commission, but they can do this with any layoff. In addition, Cuomo can say he agrees to the contract two-year guarantee against layoffs, and then next year declare this is another ‘special circumstance’ and lay people off. I think Cuomo would do this.

“If he wants to save money, why doesn’t he look to his own house? Why doesn’t he look to the executive and the legislature? Why do they have to have their own cars? Why does their gas have to be paid for by us?

“They claim they refunded the millionaires’ tax with the justification that it would create jobs, but now Cuomo is going to cut the jobs of 10,000 state workers. I understand that some of the millionaires worked during their lives, but how come GE doesn’t pay any taxes at all? They have been helped out many times before by money from the government. Why do they pay nothing in taxes and not help out now?

“I am not really happy about the wage freeze. I’m against the health care premiums going up 6 percent or 8 percent also. The health insurance increase for families is 30% and higher. Then after that, Empire, the insurance carrier, can raise its rates at will.

“I don’t think Cuomo is so different from Scott Walker in Wisconsin. When he came in I thought he was going to be fair. But now it just seems he wants to break the unions. PEF supported Cuomo.

“I think we should get rid of both parties. I think working people should have our own party. Both parties are hitting the little people not the ones who can afford it. Why don’t they do anything about the banks and corporations? They were bailed out with amounts in the trillions. The compensation for CEOs is back to what it was before 2008. But nothing is being done for the working class and the poor except more takeaways.”

Another worker, who feared to give even his first name, was working for the State for eight years at the Office of General Services. He strongly criticized the contract negotiated by the unions. “I believe when you give so many things away it is difficult to get them back when you put the bar so low.”

Like several other workers who spoke with the WSWS, he thought the corporate media campaign defaming the state workers as having too high salaries and being the cause of the need to cut the state budget was having an effect on other workers. “In this society, people think if they cut from the state workers it will save money for themselves. Definitely, it is only the rich increasing their wealth. Governor Cuomo doesn’t care about destroying ten thousand jobs but he doesn’t want to raise the taxes on the rich because he says that won’t create jobs.”



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