

New York governor says layoffs will follow rank-and-file contract rejection

Philip Guelpa
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New York's Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo announced last week that 3,500 layoffs of state employees would go ahead, following the rejection of a concessions contract by the members of the Public Employees Federation (PEF), the second-largest state employee union. Speaking to a public radio station in the state capital of Albany on September 30, Cuomo said, "If they thought we were bluffing, we're going ahead with the layoffs, and it wasn't a bluff."

The vote against the contract, by a margin of 54 to 46 percent, came after the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA), the largest state civil service union, accepted virtually identical terms under threat of mass layoffs. The PEF, representing mainly white collar workers, had been expected to fall into line, but despite the best efforts of the union officials—who endorsed Cuomo's bid for the governorship last year and obediently warned the membership that there would be layoffs if the concessions were not accepted—the majority defied Cuomo and the union.

Workers were outraged by the terms of the five-year agreement, including a three-year pay freeze, the equivalent of nine "furlough" days, during which workers would be on the job but would not be paid, and significant increases in workers' contributions to their health insurance.

As supposed compensation for these givebacks, the contract included a "no-layoff guarantee," but only for its first two years. Aside from the fact that layoffs would be permitted during the last three years, the provision was a sham on at least two other counts. First, the agreement provides that layoffs could still take place under undefined "extraordinary circumstances." Second, among the budget's cost-cutting measures are plans for government agency rationalizations and consolidations that would certainly

result in significant job losses, and which were not covered by the so-called no-layoff guarantee.

Cuomo has made the assault on public workers a key part of his strategy to deal with the state's huge budget deficit, while faithfully serving the interests of the financial elite and the super-rich. The current state budget, passed at the end of March, includes massive cuts in social programs and a projected annual reduction in labor costs of \$450 million. He has adamantly refused to consider the renewal of the so-called millionaire's tax, enacted during the initial stages of the financial crisis. While even the most modest infringement on the wealth of the ruling class is ruled out, the Cuomo administration sent out the layoff notices to PEF members within a day of the announcement of the contract rejection on September 27.

The layoffs will affect not only the jobs and living standards of those thrown out of their jobs, but the many thousands dependent on public services that will be cut back. Among the state agencies and departments affected will be the Department of Mental Health, Transportation, Taxation and Finance, the Department of Health, and the State University of New York.

Cuomo's statement last week was a signal to the ruling elite that he would not compromise in his attack on government workers. One day earlier, the *New York Times* had editorialized as follows on the contract rejection: "The union leaders have said that they want to return to the bargaining table, a step the Cuomo administration should resist. Renegotiating with the Public Employees Federation would probably mean revisiting the contract with the Civil Service Employees Association."

Cuomo needed no warning to hang tough against the state workers. He made clear in his statement to the

media that his main demand was that the union schedule a revote on the givebacks, and the only possible change would be in “tweaks” to the agreement that would amount to nothing but face-saving gimmicks for the union.

“Of course I’m open to tweaks,” he signaled to the union bureaucrats. “Now it depends on how you define tweak. If tweak means I have to find more money from the taxpayers, that’s not a tweak, OK?”

The governor’s threat was defied by the rank-and-file vote, but Cuomo acts like he has already won the battle. He is calling the shots, with layoffs as his trump card. This is only possible because he knows that the unions are his junior partners. PEF President Ken Brynien predictably groveled in response to Cuomo’s arrogance, stating that he was “encouraged the governor is willing to hear our ideas.... We are anxious to discuss with the governor’s negotiators how we can reach an agreement my members are willing to ratify while preserving state services and meeting the savings the state requires.”

Behind the scenes, horse-trading is continuing so that the union can go through the motions of a revote in order to ram the concessions down the throats of the membership. The aim of Cuomo and the PEF officials is to follow the same pattern as in the neighboring state of Connecticut, where concessions were voted down and then accepted in a second vote.

PEF members are also currently on the receiving end of a scurrilous campaign in the press, accusing senior workers of seeking only to protect their own benefits at the expense of the more junior employees. In fact, postings on online discussion forums highlight the fact that many workers are determined to continue the fight against the concessions while seeking to defend the jobs of their fellow workers.

There is only one way out of the blackmail dilemma facing the New York workers and state employees around the country who are facing similar threats. PEF members must recognize that their rejection of concessions is only the first step, and that their fight must be addressed to other sections of workers, not to the unions, including the PEF, that function as adjuncts of the big business government.

The conditions exist to win enormous support in the fight against the assault on every section of workers. The Wall Street protests spreading around the U.S. are

a small but important reflection of the anger building up among workers, students and the unemployed.

Cuomo’s ultimatum should be answered by expanding the struggle, turning to the CSEA membership, to other state employees, and to broader sections of the working class as well. Workplace committees are needed to carry forward the fight against the concessions, reaching out to all state employees, as the first step in organizing new and independent organizations of the working class.

Above all, there must be the launching of a political struggle. The state workers will be at the mercy of the Wall Street representatives in both the Democratic and Republican parties until they break with these parties and with the unions, which are tied to the political and financial establishment. All of these representatives of the status quo say that working people must pay for the crisis of the profit system. State workers seeking to fight givebacks must counterpose to this the fight for a socialist program that provides decent jobs, wages and public services for public employees and all working people.



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