New York City workers protest inequality and layoffs

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Some ten thousand workers took to the streets in New York City last Thursday to protest economic inequality and job cuts. The rally, organized by the Central Labor Council of New York City, an umbrella group of local trade unions, drew on the widespread sympathy among workers for the Occupy Wall Street movement as well as rank-and-file opposition to growing demands for concession contracts.

A large contingent of commercial building workers joined the rally right after voting to authorize a strike if a contract agreement is not reached by the New Year. Building owners in New York City are demanding, among other givebacks, a two-tier wage system for maintenance workers, represented by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 32 B-J.

Monitoring the protestors on Thursday was a huge contingent of police, numbering approximately 1,000 according to one news account. Groups of officers were stationed on nearly every street corner along the march route. A large police presence and frequent arrests featured prominently in the recent Occupy Wall Street protests. There were no clashes or arrests reported on Thursday, however.

While many of the protesters looked on the Occupy Wall Street actions as the beginning of a struggle against big business, the trade union apparatus that organized Thursday's rally had the opposite aim. While publicly proclaiming their support for the Occupy movement, the union officials were undoubtedly pleased to see the dismantling of the Zuccotti Park encampment just weeks before major contract deadlines for building service workers and transit workers, among others.

The unions' aim is to channel the growing anger of the rank and file behind the two-party system, particularly the Democrats. As Vincent Alvarez of the New York City Central Labor Council explained to local TV station NY1, "It's time that government and corporate America address issues which are going to lead to a broad-based economic prosperity and address the fundamental problem that we see today, which is the lack of jobs."

The SEIU, which gave over $28 million to the Obama campaign in 2008, endorsed the president for reelection last month. The endorsement comes as the Democratic Party is carrying out wholesale attacks on public-sector workers throughout the country and intervening in the private-sector to cut wages and benefits in order to make business "more competitive." This was illustrated most clearly in Obama's management of the forced bankruptcy of General Motors and Chrysler, with the expansion of a two-tier system in which new-hires start at roughly half the wages of current workers.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with building workers at the rally about their upcoming contract as well as the issues raised by the Occupy movement.

Errol Coe, a building worker at the Port Authority Bus Terminal in New York, explained, "They want to divide the older workers from the younger workers and pay the younger workers less. They have done this at GM and I don't like it.

"I was an auto worker here in the UAW. I used to work at the Tarrytown plant until they shut it down 11 years ago. I'm against the two-tier system. It is designed to split up the union. What people don't realize is this is for real. These are not just words. This struggle is for survival.

"What happened today was we had a meeting at the Sheraton Hotel to take a strike vote. There were approximately 800 people outside the hotel who

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couldn’t get in because there were 4,000 people inside and the hotel was filled beyond capacity. The strike vote was unanimous unless, as the union put it, they give us a reasonable contract.

“What the deal they are offering us now boils down to is that they want to take everything away from us. They want to take all 10 of our sick days away. They want a substantial increase in our medical insurance. In addition, they want to take away family health coverage for workers. This means you could not get health insurance for your wife and children, you could only get coverage for yourself. This is terrible.”

Referring to the attack on pensions, Coe continued, “They want to move them over to Wall Street. We have a defined benefit pension right now where we know we will get a certain amount of retirement income for life after we retire. They want to get rid of this entirely and put us into 401(k) plans that depend on how Wall Street is doing. Would you want to turn your money over to Wall Street?”

Omar Batista, another building worker, said, “The owners of buildings are trying to cut our pensions and anybody new coming in has to pay for their own health care. Even though I have worked a year and a half, I am considered a new worker because under the union I have to work for three years in order to get full pay. The pension and health coverage are also being attacked. They want it to come out of our pockets.

“We voted for a strike and I completely agree with a strike. It is our right as Americans. I think this time it will actually happen. I have friends who worked at Verizon and it actually happened to them what is happening to us.”

He added, “I have no faith in the unions. They are like big business. They will keep the status quo to keep things going. Every three or six years, the building changes the maintenance company they hire. Then they can change the personnel. If the union sells out I am at their mercy.

“I agree with the Occupy Wall Street 100 percent. The concept is right on point, but the organization is lacking. The people do not have a party to represent us. The Democrats have their hands in the pot just as much as the Republicans. The way I see it, something drastic has to happen with the government.”

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