

The ISO covers its tracks in betrayal of Con Ed workers

Dan Brennan, Fred Mazelis
14 August 2012

Mail ballots are scheduled to be counted some time after August 15, more than two weeks after the Utility Workers Union of America Local 1-2 announced a deal to end a four-week lockout of Con Ed workers in the New York City area.

No doubt the union hopes that the anger of many workers over the concessions contract will have abated during this time. The company is counting on the union to impose the concessions, using the argument that the contract is the best that could possibly be obtained.

The union bureaucrats at Con Ed and elsewhere are increasingly exposed as the tools of company management. They therefore take advantage of the assistance provided to them by various self-styled “socialists,” who pose as “left” critics but in fact work to keep the working class tied to the pro-capitalist trade unions and through them to the big business two-party system.

This function was on display in an article on the Con Ed lockout by Amy Muldoon in the International Socialist Organization’s *Socialist Worker*. The very headline of this comment—“Could the union have won more at Con Ed?”—is an insult to the intelligence of the workers who fought for four weeks on the picket lines despite the union’s refusal to even call a strike.

“Won more”? This is how the ISO refers to a contract that they themselves admit contains a two-tier pension system and increases in medical care costs, along with wage increases that do not keep up with inflation and the expansion of the company’s use of contract workers. Indeed, the increases in health care costs will more than wipe out the 2 to 4 percent wage increases over the next four years.

Muldoon echoes the arguments made by the union, with a slightly “left” twist. “While the Con Ed contract is slightly better than many recent contracts—and much

better than most coming after a lockout—it still falls short of what the company could afford and what members might have won after deepening their organizing.”

That the ISO can present the deal as a partial victory only demonstrates its slavish acceptance of the whole framework of the capitalist system. For them, it suffices to point out that the outcome could have been worse. They argue that Con Ed workers should take some consolation in the fact that the contract does not (yet) slash wages in half.

The choice of words is significant. Muldoon refers to “what the company could afford.” She elaborates: “For a company that made over \$1 billion in every year of the previous contract, these concessions are unnecessary...”

Contrast this to the Socialist Equality Party’s statement on the contract, which warned, after explaining that Con Ed is making bumper profits, “Workers confront not merely the rapacious greed of this or that corporation or executive, but the failure of an entire economic system. What is happening at Con Ed is part of a national and indeed global process...”

The ISO will have none of this. Their technique is to flatter the workers for their militancy while consciously avoiding the central political issues. Hence the concessions are “unnecessary.” Presumably for a company that was not doing well, givebacks would be expected and understandable.

Just as they attempt to lull the Con Ed workers with phrases about what the company can “afford,” the ISO insists that the unions are organizations of the working class, that they follow mistaken and “unfortunate” policies that can be corrected by pressure and reform.

Muldoon is well aware of the anger and disgust among Con Ed workers. She tries to appease this while

keeping well within the bounds of the profit system and its needs.

She writes, for instance, that “the executive board of Local 1-2 accepted more concessions than many members feel were necessary.” Later she complains, in an attempt to look more critical of the union leadership, of the “eagerness to accept a flawed contract” and “the mentality that views unions more as businesses than as vehicles for democracy and social justice. Unfortunately, this is the dominant strategy across the labor movement today.”

This raises several issues. First, if this is the role of the leadership, why was the ISO building up the union during the month-long lockout? In this very same article Muldoon writes approvingly of a “community solidarity meeting” that was organized during the lockout. The purpose of this meeting, in which the ISO was an enthusiastic participant, was not to expose the role of the union, but to give it a “left” cover under conditions in which many rank-and-file Con Ed workers had concluded that the union was doing nothing to advance their struggle and was operating as a tool of the company.

The unions have demonstrated over and over again for the past several decades that they function as an arm of the corporate establishment and the capitalist state, especially through their alliance with the Democratic Party.

Muldoon, however, wants to keep workers ignorant of these facts. The term “unfortunate” is designed to encourage the illusion that the unions can and will defend the interests of workers. Under these circumstances that is the equivalent of telling workers to keep faith with the Democrats and with capitalism itself.

Sure enough, this same ISO writer alludes to the role of New York’s Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo, who brokered the deal that ended the lockout. “[S]ome members are angry that a so-called ‘friend of labor’ in the governor’s mansion sat by while defined-benefit pensions were sacrificed on the alter [sic] of profit,” she writes. She associates herself with workers who she suggests hoped to have Cuomo intervene on their behalf.

Rather than explaining the necessity to break decisively with the Democrats, Muldoon suggests that, under the right circumstances, Cuomo could have been

compelled to stand up for the Con Ed workers’ pensions. The governor’s role as a vicious enemy of the working class, which he has proved repeatedly in his two years in office, goes unmentioned. Just last April Cuomo imposed a bill instituting a new pension tier for new hires in state government.

In its promotion of the Democrats, the ISO invariably seeks to bring in identity politics. Muldoon refers to “the racist dimension of power cuts,” and the fact that “older workers tend to be whiter.” The idea behind this is supposedly that minority workers in New York could be convinced to support the Con Ed workers on racial grounds.

The issue of race and ethnicity, so beloved of many Wall Street Democrats precisely because it gives them a liberal veneer and at the same time aids in dividing the working class, is something that the ISO pushes to a point that is sometimes ludicrous but no less reactionary. The Con Ed struggle points to the need to unite the working class, not to hide the fundamental class issues behind issues of race.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the Con Ed contract vote, the struggle of these workers and the entire working class in the face of the historic onslaught on living standards and social conditions is just beginning. It is a battle against a bankrupt and outmoded social system.

The dividing line between the Socialist Equality Party and groups like the ISO is clear. They seek to keep workers tied to the capitalist system, while the SEP fights tirelessly to show that the central issue is the need to unite the working class in a political struggle, which requires a break with the parties of big business. The interests of the entire working class can only be defended through the fight for a socialist program that proceeds from the social needs of humanity and not the profit interests of the super-rich.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)