

New York mayor de Blasio and unions prepare new attacks on city workers

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Preliminary talks began last week in New York aimed at laying the groundwork for new contracts between the city and unions representing teachers, transit workers, firefighters, clerical workers and almost 150 other bargaining units. All of these workers, comprising more than 300,000 city employees, have been working without contracts for as long as four years.

Nearly eight weeks into the term of the city's new "progressive" mayor Bill de Blasio, attention is increasingly focusing on what the political, corporate and financial establishment is calling the new mayor's biggest "test." In the words of a recent *New York Times* editorial, he must show that he can "run this unruly city." He must, in other words, use his "progressive" credentials to subordinate city employees and other sections of the working class to the insatiable demands of Wall Street.

De Blasio is the first New York mayor, as he has repeated on more than one occasion, who entered office with every major city labor contract outstanding. Hundreds of thousands of workers have had no negotiated pay raises for years. An additional factor is the demand of the city's teachers for the same 4 percent wage increases that other city workers received in 2009 and 2010. In the midst of the round of contract negotiations at that time, after the 2008 financial collapse, the Bloomberg administration broke with the longstanding practice of "pattern bargaining" and refused to match those raises.

The teachers and the city are now in the midst of non-binding mediation on this claim, which, going back four years, would amount to \$3.4 billion in back pay. If the fact-finding panel agrees that they are owed this amount, the city could still ignore the finding. In any case, all the city unions without contracts are calling for retroactive raises that would add up to as much as \$7 billion on top of the teachers' retroactive pay.

The big business media trumpets the claim that the mayor, with his "close ties to labor," faces a dilemma in

dealing with the unions. That is not at all the case. The unions are entirely aware of de Blasio's needs and will do all in their power to help him serve the financial and corporate establishment. It is not the unions and their pseudo-left backers that worry City Hall and the newspaper editorialists, but rather the city workers themselves, who have watched with growing anger and impatience as the ruling elite flaunts its wealth as never before while working class families struggle to stay afloat.

Reflecting the ruling class's approval for de Blasio as well as its concern over the tests ahead, the *Times* in its editorial entitled "The Mayor and the Unions" complimented the new mayor on his first month in office, but added, "Still, his job demands more than affability. Now is the time for Mr. de Blasio to be bold to the point of confrontational, to endure name-calling, resentment and lower poll numbers. The rap on him is that he hasn't run anything; the rap on liberal Democrats is that they can't run this unruly city. Mr. Bloomberg, for all his efficiency and tough talk, never hammered out a deal to put the city and its labor costs on a sound footing. Now is Mr. de Blasio's chance to achieve that goal and upend the widely held, if unfair, expectations of what a Democrat can do."

De Blasio ran his campaign as a supposed foe of inequality, but he has been back-pedaling on what was never more than campaign rhetoric since the day he became the mayor-elect.

Overnight, the new mayor's slogan has suddenly changed from "a tale of two cities," the slogan on which he campaigned, to "One New York," the words emblazoned on an enormous banner when de Blasio delivered his State of the City Address two weeks ago.

How did two cities become one in just a few weeks? The shift underlines the utter cynicism of this Clinton administration veteran and of the Democratic Party operatives who are advising him, who obviously believe

they can fool all of the people all of the time.

When asked recently by reporters about the expired contracts, the mayor replied with what one journalist called a “sly smile.” “We’re in the great unknown,” he said. “We are going to need cost savings and efficiencies to get through this.”

In other words, city workers, even if they are granted a pittance in pay raises by de Blasio—which is by no means assured—are going to have to pay through concessions on medical insurance, pensions and other benefits. The cupboard is bare as far as the workers are concerned, while the city’s 70 billionaires and hundreds of multi-millionaires cavort around Manhattan, with sky-high multi-million dollar condos rising on West 57th Street and nearby, seemingly at the rate of one a week.

De Blasio combined his call for “cost savings” with an olive branch to the unions. He will deal with negotiations in “a very respectful and positive manner,” the mayor declared when he presented his budget proposals earlier this month.

The union executives did not need convincing of the mayor’s sincerity, and indicated they were more than willing to do business with him. United Federation of Teachers president Michael Mulgrew was effusive. “In terms of City Hall, we have a mayor who’s here to work with us, who has an open dialogue. When our conversations take place, it’s about what’s the best thing for us to actually do and how do we achieve it instead of ‘I want to do this so what are you gonna do to allow me to do what I want,’” he said.

Harry Nespoli, chairman of the Municipal Labor Committee, added, “We are ready to work with the city to reach a fair and reasonable contract that reflects the needs of the workforce and the citizens of New York.”

The unions accept in advance, in other words, the argument that city workers must take into account the needs of “the citizens,” as if city employees were not part of an overwhelming working class majority whose needs have been trampled on relentlessly for the past quarter of a century.

The union executives want only to be consulted as partners. They are virtually begging to help the mayor impose concessions. The aim is to show their usefulness, and thus to protect their own privileges against the needs of city workers.

As Nespoli’s statement indicates, the bureaucrats accept the ruling establishment’s divide-and-conquer strategy, a strategy that de Blasio will implement with greater sophistication than his Republican predecessors and that

he is particularly suited for because of his ties to the unions.

New York City employees will be told that they cannot expect anything while state workers have had their wages frozen ever since their unions granted concessions two and a half years ago. Furthermore, the city workers have received minuscule increases over the past decade, so it is time for them to make the kind of “sacrifices” that workers in the private sector have suffered in the past decade.

City workers making salaries of \$50,000 or \$60,000 a year will be called greedy. The working poor, whom de Blasio proposes to help with a paltry increase in the minimum wage, are to be pitted against the teachers, transit workers and others.

The bankruptcy of Detroit is also being held over the workers’ heads. Retirees in what was once the fourth-largest city in the country are now being told they must sacrifice their pensions and be reduced to destitution, as part of the deal to pay off the financial parasites. The example of Detroit looms large and does not even have to be spelled out.

New York City public employees have been warned. There is only one way to fight the conspiracy that is taking shape under the de Blasio administration. The divide-and-conquer strategy must be countered by uniting every section of the working class, including the youth, low-wage workers, the unemployed and immigrant communities, in a common struggle to make the super-rich pay for the crisis of their bankrupt system. This requires a political strategy, centered on a break with the alliance between the Democratic Party and the unions and the building of a mass movement based on a socialist program.



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