

Caltrans workers rally in Sacramento for better pay and benefits

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Last Friday nearly 400 Caltrans workers rallied in Sacramento, demanding better pay and benefits after years of deteriorating working conditions. They have been working without a contract since the last one expired in July 2015.

Caltrans is responsible for building and maintaining highway, bridge, and rail transportation in the state of California. Caltrans workers are part of the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) State Unit 12.

The rally was held outside the California Department of Human Resources, where a bargaining session had been scheduled but was canceled by the state in order to avoid the protest.

The current proposal by the state includes a raise of 7 percent over three years, alongside a 4.6 percent takeaway for retiree health care. This comes after years of cuts enforced on workers by former Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and current Democratic Governor Jerry Brown.

According to a member of the IUOE bargaining team, Ed Harlow, “In the last contract we gave up an extra 5 percent to go to retirement.” He continued, “we let the cat out of the bag when we first accepted cuts and since then they’ve take more each year, and by the end of this contract our pay will be the same as eight years ago.”

In that time the nationwide rate of inflation was 14.3 percent, pointing to a sharp decline in living standards for Caltrans workers. Harlow added, “we took 15 percent overall in cuts, people lost houses, lost families, and went into bankruptcy.”

While take home pay has stagnated or declined the cost of living has skyrocketed. For example, the average rental price for a two-bedroom apartment in California in 2015 was \$1,500 a month, 50 percent

above the national average. Workers who live near major cities like San Francisco or Los Angeles have to pay even more.

Caltrans workers who live in rural areas don’t necessarily fare any better. One worker from Fairfield noted that the cost of health insurance for his family has nearly tripled over the past few years, from just over \$200 to just over \$600 a month.

One worker with several years’ experience, Ron Saunders, mentioned getting a paycheck of just \$800 for a two-week period. “We made more six years ago than we do today,” he said. “They say you make \$20 an hour but then your take home is more like \$14. Last month it cost me \$600 to feed my family, and then you pay rent and that’s all your money that month.”

Many of the workers spoke of needing second or third jobs to make ends meet. Michael, a young worker who has been with Caltrans three years, had to take a second job cleaning local parks. Several workers had to live out of their cars after being transferred, until they had saved up enough money to rent an apartment.

The road and rail maintenance that Caltrans workers do is backbreaking and dangerous. Almost every year Caltrans workers die on the job and many are injured, frequently being hit by cars. In a group of five road workers at the rally, four of them had been hit by cars, one of them three different times in the past year. Despite this, the state refuses to pay Caltrans workers hazard pay, even though that perk is given to those with much safer jobs, like police officers.

The IUOE has accepted years of cuts and has done nothing to wage a genuine struggle in the current contract negotiations. The rally itself was called by workers in order to pressure both the state and union bargaining teams. After workers called a rally outside negotiations in January, the IUOE tentatively endorsed

the February 26 rally, while agreeing with the state to reschedule negotiations to a different day.

The reason the IUOE has no interest in organizing its members against another concessions contract is that the union leadership is deeply integrated into the Democratic Party and agrees with the big lie pushed by both major parties that there is no money for pensions, healthcare or wages. Any struggle to win increases in wages, safety conditions and benefits would bring Caltrans workers into immediate conflict with the Democratic Party, which controls the entire state government.

Following the 2008 economic crash the state budget was slashed resulting in furloughs in which workers lost three days of pay each month. While the federal government in a bipartisan agreement immediately found \$700 billion for the Troubled Assets Relief Program to bail out the banks, they refused any relief programs to city and state governments or employee pension funds like the California Public Employees' Retirement System (CalPERS).

Both parties told state workers they needed to accept cuts to balance the budget and the unions readily agreed. Democrats like the former mayor of San Jose, Chuck Reed, led the charge in attacking CalPERS. Pension reform has been nothing but the effort to pay for bailouts and tax cuts to corporations out of workers' pockets.

The Democrats have been aided in this by the IUOE leaders who endorsed Brown's run for governor in the 2010 elections. In the current elections, the IUOE has endorsed Hillary Clinton, who as a Senator supported the bailout of the banks and the refusal of the government to prosecute any of the criminals behind the 2008 crash. She also supports Obamacare, which has provided enormous profits to the health insurance companies while driving up the cost of healthcare for workers.

There was no enthusiasm for the union's endorsement on the picket line. Harlow stated that the Democrats "haven't done any more for us than anyone else has." A group of workers all agreed with the proposition that "no candidate in the current elections would support workers."

One young maintenance worker complained that the union was "funneling our money to Hillary Clinton again who is just going to bomb more countries in the

Middle East, as if that's going to help us."

Caltrans workers are just one section of public workers, like teachers and bus drivers, who have seen the continuous erosion of their wages and benefits. A successful struggle for a better contract can only be won by breaking out of the isolation imposed by the unions and organizing alongside workers in the public as well as private sectors who confront the same problems.



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