

# Mobilize the working class to defend Caltrans workers!

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*This statement will be distributed at tomorrow's statewide rallies of Caltrans workers, who build and maintain highway, bridge, and rail transportation in the state of California.* For nine months the Caltrans workers have been working without a contract. After years of concessions contracts that have slashed their pensions and established poverty wages, Caltrans workers are pushing back as part of a growing wave of working class resistance.

Over the past few years California has seen strikes among refinery workers, nurses, longshoremens, municipal employees, bus and train drivers. Next week, State University faculty are set to go on a five-day statewide strike over the same wage and benefit cuts facing Caltrans workers. While the potential exists to unify these struggles, the unions have kept each section of workers isolated from the rest.

Meanwhile, the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) and other unions have provided financial and political support for the same Democratic politicians that have been slashing public employees' wages and pensions. From Obama and Governor Jerry Brown to the local level, the Democrats, no less than the Republicans, have slashed vital infrastructure spending and privatized public education and other services.

In January, Brown proposed a budget that would cut \$10 million a year out of Caltrans through making it "more efficient" and doubling the number of contract workers. At the same time, the state has offered a meager raise to workers that would bring their pay back to what it was in 2008, *not counting* the 10 percent inflation since then. State Democrats are also demanding workers increase their pension contributions.

Since 2010, when Brown was elected with IUOE

backing, the Democrats have controlled both houses of the state government. In 2011, Brown imposed \$8 billion in austerity measures, which included furlough days, wage cuts and increased health care and pension contributions. The following year, the Democratic governor signed his "pension reform" bill that raised the retirement age from 55 to 67. He boasted then, "We're lowering benefits to what they were before I was governor the first time" in 1975.

Decades of infrastructure cuts have left thousands of miles of damaged roads, over 560 "distressed" bridges, and dangerously antiquated and overburdened rail systems. To fix these problems would require a massive expansion of funding for Caltrans to hire more workers and guarantee better pay and benefits. Instead, Brown is looking for "flexibility" through so-called public-private partnerships that dole out billions in public resources to politically-connected contractors.

What is happening in California is happening nationally and internationally. Since 2008, the Obama administration has overseen the destruction of the jobs of hundreds of thousands of teachers and other public employees. Cuts to the nation's already antiquated water and transportation infrastructure have contributed to the lead poisoning of Flint, Michigan and fatal Amtrak derailments.

By insisting on the right to livable wages and a dignified retirement, Caltrans workers are being thrust into a political struggle against the entire economic and political system, including the unions, which claim there is no money. At the same time, corporate profits and the stock markets are hitting record highs, the billionaires are salting away their fortunes in offshore tax shelters, and trillions are squandered on criminal wars.

The top 1 percent of Californians received an average

income of \$1.6 million in 2013, 35 times that of the bottom 99 percent. While workers have made all the sacrifices since the 2008 financial crisis, the super-rich, who produced the catastrophe, have collected all the profits of the ostensible recovery.

A struggle against this is not only necessary, it is entirely possible. To conduct a fight, however, Caltrans workers must not look to the corrupt politicians and union bureaucrats, but to their allies—other public employees, manufacturing and service workers, immigrant workers, students and the unemployed. Every section of the working class is suffering from the looting of wages and public assets, and there is a growing determination to fight.

To carry this out, Caltrans workers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands through the formation of rank-and-file committees controlled democratically by the workers themselves. These committees must reject the straitjacket of phony negotiations and lobbying campaigns and instead reach out to CSU faculty and students and other sections of the working class to organize the broadest mobilization of the working class against the governor and the state legislature.

The IUOE has repeatedly declared its willingness to “partner” with the Democrats to lower labor costs and “balance the budget.” The union leaders were so pleased with Brown’s cooperation that they endorsed him a second time in 2014. Nationally, the IUOE leadership has endorsed Hillary Clinton in the presidential primaries. Clinton and her husband have made \$140 million since 2008 through speaking fees and other rewards for serving Wall Street.

The growing militancy of Caltrans workers has made it difficult for the IUOE to ram through another concessions contract. After worker protests in February threatened to break free from the control of the union, the IUOE leaders joined with state officials to further drag out “negotiations” in order to wear down rank-and-file resistance.

Talks were rescheduled for March only to be extended until July 29, with little more than a toothless “unfair labor practice” complaint from the IUOE. By the time Caltrans negotiations resume, 16 of the 21 public employee bargaining units will be working without a contract.

The greatest obstacle to unifying all of these separate

struggles is the trade unions. Everything now depends on the independent initiative to Caltrans workers themselves. If Caltrans workers can break through the isolation imposed by the unions and begin a counteroffensive, they would quickly win broader support.

Such a struggle must be the catalyst for the building of a mass political movement of the working class to oppose austerity, social inequality and war. The Socialist Equality Party is fighting to build a mass political movement of the working class, independent of all factions of the Democratic Party, from Clinton to Sanders, in order to fight for a workers’ government and the genuine socialist reorganization of society.

The ill-gotten gains of the financial criminals should be seized and the banks nationalized under the democratic control and collective ownership of the working class. Only in this way can the vast wealth produced by the labor of working people be used to rebuild the nation’s infrastructure and guarantee the right to a secure and good-paying job, health care and pensions for all workers. We urge Caltrans workers to contact the SEP to take up this fight.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**