

Caltrans workers rally in Sacramento and San Bernardino

Our reporters
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On Friday, hundreds of California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) workers held three rallies across California demanding a better contract with higher pay and benefits, improved safety conditions and a draw-down in the state's hiring of non-unionized contract workers to replace Caltrans staff.

Caltrans workers build and maintain highway, bridge, railway and other infrastructure in the state of California. They have been working without a contract for nine months and have endured years of sellout contracts negotiated by the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE).

Caltrans workers unanimously expressed opposition to the Democratic Party-controlled state government, and in particular Governor Jerry Brown who was re-elected in 2010 and 2014 with the support of the IUOE. The union has repeatedly used the fraudulent claim that Brown and the Democrats are the best option available to workers. The IUOE is currently supporting Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton, the personification of status quo establishment politics, in the presidential campaign.

The current contract proposal involves slightly higher wages coupled with even higher employee contributions to health care plans and CalPERS, the state retirement fund, resulting in a net decrease in monthly pay. Many of the signs at the rally condemned this.

There has been a media blackout on the struggle of Caltrans workers. The only article published outside three from the WSWS was a 250-word piece by the *Sacramento Bee* prior to the last rally held in February.

The WSWS spoke with workers at the Sacramento and San Bernardino rallies, distributing copies of the statement, "Mobilize the working class to defend

Caltrans workers!" At both rallies, workers expressed deep anger over the Democrats' unrelenting austerity.

In Sacramento, Erik Gonzalez, a lead worker with 17 years, described the horrendous lack of safety precautions provided at Caltrans work sites. He noted caustically, "We're on the freeway all day and all we have separating us from death are a few dozen orange rubber cones."

"With the widespread use of cell phones, nobody's paying attention while driving anymore. There's an increased chance that under-trained people will get hurt," Gonzalez said.

When asked about the Brown Administration and the Democratic Party and their relationship with the IUOE, Erik said, "I'm sure the union has a pocket that the Democrats' hands are deep inside of."

When told about the potential strike on California State University (CSU) campuses (which was called off later Friday), Gonzalez commented on the need for the unity of the working class, declaring, "It's really unfair that any one piece of the pie is left out. We need to stand tall together. Had we all taken a stand together as state workers at an earlier time, we wouldn't be in negotiations now. It would be worldwide news."

Regarding the IUOE and their role in the negotiations, Gonzalez declared, "We need to drop the union and get a different union." Describing the role of the UAW in last year's contract negotiations with the Big Three automakers, our reporter argued for the need for the working class more broadly to break with all the unions, which promote nationalism and are tied to the Democratic Party.

Steve Novak, an electrician with five years, attended the rally in Sacramento and spoke with the WSWS.

Novak gave voice to the widespread hostility shared by workers across the US and internationally toward

the Democratic Party, declaring, “Democrats have failed us for years. I think they’re all crooks myself. If we don’t have college degrees, they look at us like peasants. Well pretty soon, the peasants will revolt.”

He also highlighted the precarious safety conditions that Caltrans workers face: “We’re working on the side of the road. There are more Caltrans workers killed every year than CHP [California Highway Patrol] officers, but we don’t even have hazard pay. If a truck hits me, I’m gone. We can’t find guys to work because the conditions and pay are so bad.”

Other workers standing with Novak spoke of the numerous carcinogens that Caltrans workers are exposed to on a daily basis, including those found in serpentine aggregate, tar and asphalt. One worker said, “Take a look at our safety manual, there are hundreds of carcinogens that we inhale on a daily basis. There are a lot of hazardous materials that the administration doesn’t even acknowledge.”

When asked about the contract negotiations and the role of the IUOE, Novak commented, “It’s disgraceful. We’re just asking for equal pay.”

Another worker stated, “I don’t know if I trust my union,” prompting another to declare, “I don’t either.” A fourth worker noted, “We get strong-armed to join the union and they don’t do anything to protect us.”

Over the course of the past year of negotiations, the IUOE has never called a rally to bring its membership together. Caltrans workers had to take this initiative upon themselves, independently organizing a rally outside the negotiations building in January. This prompted the IUOE to tentatively endorse the second rally of roughly 400 workers in February, while rescheduling the negotiations with the state to another day.

Commenting on the initiative taken by workers, Steve said, “This has never happened before. We’ve never had unity before.” The group of workers were all in agreement on the need to strike. After one declared, “I’m voting to strike,” others agreed, with one jokingly stating, “I’m ready to eat Top Ramen for a few weeks.”

Again, the group expressed skepticism toward their leading union officials, with one worker stating, “The union doesn’t want us to strike.”

Numerous workers at the Sacramento rally expressed hostility to the state’s hiring of contract workers as a

replacement for Caltrans workers. This is the preferred method for the state, because contract workers are non-unionized and therefore more vulnerable to exploitation. Another purpose for hiring contractors instead of increasing Caltrans’ budget is to divide road maintenance workers into separate entities, hindering the unity of this section of the working class.

San Bernardino

In San Bernardino, the WSWS spoke with Aaron, who again highlighted the life-threatening working conditions. “We’re rated as one of the top five most dangerous jobs. That should say something about what we deserve right there,” he said.

Another worker, Chuck, stated, “All we’re doing now is picking up trash. We’re just trash picker-uppers. Everything is a mess. Take a look at the freeways, they’re filthy. I had a good friend of mine who died picking up a dead dog on the highway. He was a good friend who I had worked with for years. They tell us to work through that kind of trauma and we still haven’t gotten a raise in years.”

When told about the potential strike on CSU campuses, Aaron said, “I think teachers should be some of the highest paid people. They’re teaching our youth. That’s a good investment right there, it’s what keeps people out of poverty. And our education system has gone awry, it’s terrible. People have to stand up.”

Tim, a mechanic, discussed the decline in the real value of wages, noting, “We haven’t had any pay increases in over a decade, because we keep paying more into pensions. I’ve got paystubs from 12 years ago, and I make \$50 more on my base pay per month than I did then. That’s a \$50 a month raise, and the prices of everything else has gone up. Groceries have gone up, rent has gone up, and our pay has not gone up. All we want is a fair wage.”



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