

Nearly 5,000 Macy's workers set to go on strike

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On Thursday, May 19 nearly 5,000 New York area Macy's employees, including those at the historic Herald Square store in Manhattan, voted to go on strike on June 15, when the current contract extension under which they are working runs out. Their contract officially expired on May 1.

The main issues are health care, pay, and work schedules according to a statement released by Local 1-S of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU). The company is reportedly seeking to cut retirement benefits and to exclude certain job categories from coverage under the new contract.

One Macy's sales employee who spoke with a WSWS reporter at the Herald Square store stated that the company is proposing to shift the cleaning of the store after hours to her department in order to reduce its cleaning staff.

For its part, a Macy's spokesperson commented that, "Calls to strike by the union are an expected and standard part of the negotiation process." This cynical statement speaks to the choreographed collaboration between the trade unions and employers in seeking to impose concessions on workers.

On the day after the vote, RWDSU President Stuart Appelbaum stated, "The company cannot afford to undermine its workforce at a time when it faces greater competition from online retailers like Amazon." This statement seeks to obscure the reality that, at a time when the economic crisis which erupted in 2008 continues to worsen around the world, corporations across the board, from auto to aerospace to telecommunications to retail, want to wrest concession after concession from their workers. The statement is also intended to present a false image to workers that the union is fighting for their interests.

The pattern of betrayals by the unions, including the

RWDSU, is clear.

In June 2011, a strike at Macy's in New York was averted at the last minute as the union agreed to a contract with scant wage increases which did not keep pace with the rapid rise in the cost of living in the already expensive metropolitan area. At the time, the agreement was hailed by the union president as a "solid contract." The last time Macy's workers in New York went on strike was in 1972.

Macy's workers in San Francisco went on strike in 2004 but the union called off the strike after only one day. Several picketers were arrested for blocking the front door to the Macy's in Union Square.

In recent years, retail businesses have been suffering substantial declines in revenue as workers' purchasing power continues to contract. These companies are coming under tremendous pressure from Wall Street investors to savagely attack workers' jobs, wages and benefits.

This trend is accelerating, with a number of companies either announcing large-scale store closings or going out of business altogether. This is resulting in mass layoffs and a drive to squeeze ever greater profits from the remaining employees under the threat that they could lose their jobs.

As is typical in the retail industry, the pay for Macy's New York employees is abysmal, especially given the extraordinarily high cost of living in city. According to the website Glassdoor, the average hourly wages of a range of sales associate titles at Macy's stores in the New York City area are approximately \$9.00 per hour and benefits are limited. This is after the RWDSU's 2011 "solid contract."

Despite this, the business and corporate elites continue to reap lavish rewards. Last year, Macy's chief executive, Terry Lundgren, received total

compensation of \$11.7 million, including \$1.6 million in base salary and a range of perks.

Under these circumstances, it is a pernicious lie for union heads to claim that isolated struggles can defend, let alone advance workers' interests. Workers can place absolutely no confidence in their union leadership, which will do everything in its power to impose another concessions-laden contract as quickly as possible, as is now being done by the CWA and IBEW in the Verizon strike.

There is a resurgence of the class struggle around the world, but at every turn unions and political leaders are attempting to suppress this development. Workers must break free from these organizations, form their own rank-and-file workplace committees and fight for a socialist program that unites workers internationally in a common struggle against the capitalist system.



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