

# 12,000 Caltrans workers offered effective pay decrease in new contract

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About 12,000 maintenance workers employed by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) were given ballots Monday to vote on a new contract agreement reached between the state government and the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) on May 26.

The contract, which offers a 10 percent pay raise over four years, means that—adjusted for inflation and benefit changes—a slight pay decrease. Workers are being asked over the course of the contract to spend an additional 4.1 percent of their salary on retirement contributions. Inflation, which averaged 1.5 percent a year since 2008, would eat up another 6 percent of workers' pay gains.

The official inflation figures, however, do not fully take into account the impact of rental and housing costs, which will have a disproportionate impact on new workers moving to join the workforce. The average California home price increased by a whopping 50 percent between May 2012 and May 2016. Workers who do not already own homes, or have apartments that are not rent controlled—often younger and newer workers to the job—will see a significant pay cut when the sharp increase in the cost of living is considered.

While workers are being asked to accept, in effect, a pay decrease, the Democrats, with the support of the major unions, including the IUOE, have proposed a new state budget which will cut \$10 million out of the Caltrans budget and work to double the number of contract workers in Caltrans in order to make it “more efficient.”

This attempt by the Democrats and their union backers to replace the Caltrans workforce with temp labor is being done behind workers' backs and is not being openly discussed by the union, which has backed Democratic Governor Jerry Brown throughout his recent tenure in office.

The contract, meanwhile, does nothing to ensure the safety of workers, which has been a major complaint of workers. Caltrans workers, who repair roads and bridges, are employed on some of the more dangerous jobs in California. Since 1921, 184 Caltrans workers have died on the job, according to the agency. That is almost two people per year. The last person to die was Oscar Vargas, 54, from the greater San Diego area. He lost control of his work truck on May 4, 2016 and crashed.

The job is also dangerous to long-term health. Workers are exposed, often daily, to serpentine aggregate, tar and asphalt. As a worker told the WSWs at a rally in Sacramento in April, “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.”

The contract agreement comes almost two months after Caltrans workers staged a series of three rallies on April 8, without union support or endorsement, including one outside the site of contract talks in Sacramento (the union endorsed the rally retroactively on their web site after canceling the contract negotiations for that day). At the time of the rallies workers had been without a contract for nine months. At the rallies workers voiced their eagerness to struggle for better pay, safer working conditions, and better benefits. Many carried signs denouncing management's proposal for an effective net pay decrease, which has now been accepted by the IUOE.

The Caltrans contract vote takes place in the midst of signs of mounting militancy by the working class in the United States and internationally. It follows the strike by 40,000 Verizon workers on the US East Coast and massive strikes and protests in France against changes

to the labor code.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges Caltrans workers to reject the contract. We call for the building of rank-and-file committees, independent from the unions, the Democratic party and management, to lead the fight against concessions and for a decent contract. As part of this fight Caltrans workers should reach out to autoworkers, oil workers, telecommunication workers, teachers, and health care workers—all whom are facing bitter struggles for safety, health care, retirement and wages.



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