

# California transportation workers reject sellout contract

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In a vote earlier this month, maintenance workers employed by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) overwhelmingly rejected a sellout contract negotiated between the state government and the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE).

The roughly 12,000 electricians, window cleaners, aqueduct construction workers and truck drivers have been working without a contract since July 1, 2015. The state and IUOE Unit 12 came to an agreement last June, which include a 10 percent pay raise over four years that would translate into a pay decrease after adjusting for inflation and changes in benefits.

Union officials have not disclosed the number of workers who voted, but admitted that 67 percent of those voting rejected the contract. The vote also authorized the union to conduct a strike if ongoing negotiations reach an impasse.

In the face of this militant stand taken by workers, the IUOE offered no explanation about why such an unacceptable contract was offered or indicated how it would carry forward a fight for a better contract in the future.

Tim Neep, director of Unit 12 and the union's chief negotiator, told the *Sacramento Bee*, "I did not believe (the tentative deal) would pass through the membership ... I saw it coming, and I warned the state about it possibly not ratifying." He also stated that there was no immediate plan for a strike, and that the union and state would return to the bargaining table.

The IUOE has served to keep maintenance workers isolated in order to avoid a confrontation between large sections of public sector workers with Governor Jerry Brown and the Democratic Party as a whole.

Earlier this month, public employees in San Joaquin County held a three-day strike over unfair labor

practices before the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) sent them back to work without a contract.

Similarly, maintenance workers and faculty at California State University (CSU) system were kept separated by the unions that supposedly represent them. The California Faculty Association (CFA), which negotiates on behalf of the professors and instructors, called off a walkout based on a contract negotiated behind the backs of workers. Under the latest agreement the faculty raises are entirely dependent on the state legislature providing what the CSU administration deems adequate funding.

Based on the 2016-2017 state budget, the university system will remain funded below the levels in effect before the 2008 financial crash.

The same state budget also called for \$100 million in "cost savings reforms" from "Caltrans efficiencies," a euphemism for attacking the living standards and working conditions of Caltrans workers. Brown also proposes that the budget reduce the number of workers retiring into the Public Employee Retirement System (CalPERS), and push for the use of private contractors.

The IUOE has effectively worked to subordinate workers to the needs of the Democratic Party, while pressuring them to accept any agreement at all by dragging out negotiations.

In April hundreds of Caltrans workers rallied across the state to demand raises and oppose the use of contract workers. Despite the hostility towards the political establishment expressed by many workers, who denounced the Democrats as "crooks," the IUOE has repeatedly claimed that workers had to support the Democrats. The union has also given its support to multi-millionaire Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.

Unable so far to impose an austerity contract on workers, the IUOE has resorted to coercing workers through lengthy contract negotiations. As a result of not having a contract workers have gone a year without a raise, even as inflation is expected to rise by nearly one percent in 2016.

The overall rate of inflation is outpaced by soaring housing prices, and rising cost of living in California. Between May 2012 and May 2016 the average home price in California has gone up by 50 percent. According to Living Wage Calculator, a website created professor of urban planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Amy K. Glasmeier, a living wage for a single parent with one child in California would be \$26.83 an hour, or an annual salary of \$55,806.40 before taxes. In comparison the median annual income of IUOE Unit 12 members in 2015 was \$48,404, according to a payroll analysis by the *Sacramento Bee*.

The decision by Caltrans workers to reject the contract is a reflection of the determination by workers across the country to fighting against growing inequality and exploitation. The actions of the IUOE and other unions in California, however, point to the bankrupt perspective these organizations, and the need for workers to build rank-and-file committees—independent of the unions—and work to unite teachers, nurses, and private sector workers in a common political struggle.



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