

New York City EMS workers must reject the new DC37 sellout contract!

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19 August 2021

New York City's Emergency Medical Service workers are set to vote on a tentative agreement reached between the administration of New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio and District Council 37, the union organizing EMS workers, a part of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).

The contract has been heavily promoted in the New York City press as a historic and transformative windfall for the 4,500 EMS workers who earn poverty level wages. Emergency Medical Technician salaries start at only one dollar and fifty cents per hour above the minimum wage and rise to \$50,604 per year after five years of service in one of the world's most expensive cities.

"This agreement increases wages ... Our emergency service workers are heroes who got New York City through the worst crisis in generations and continue to serve our city every day with honor," said de Blasio in a statement, steeped in the patronizing rhetoric that health care workers have become all too familiar with since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The executive director of DC37, Henry Garrido, added, "This is an important day for our first responders in Locals 2507 and 3621 who are getting the big raises they deserve."

These are cynical lies. Despite the congratulatory proclamations of a "big raise" and a "major pay jump," the agreement represents a major setback for EMS workers. The contract adheres to the framework of pattern bargaining in New York, where the unions find "savings" to fund raises that fall behind inflation, in effect perpetuating a continuous deterioration in wages and living standards.

The retroactive pay increases of 2 percent, 2.25 percent, 3 percent and 4 percent for the years 2018

through 2021, along with an additional 6 percent differential for workers who participate in a newly established Mental Health Response Unit program, are being funded by requiring new workers to use a substandard health care plan, the restructuring of work schedules with forced overtime and an increase in the contractual amount of annual work hours.

A portion of the funding for the raise comes from a previous health care concession that forces newly hired employees to be covered under the very unpopular HIP HMO Preferred Plan for the first 365 days of employment. This constraint on health insurance options for city employees was negotiated by the Municipal Labor Committee (a coalition of more than 90 municipal unions) in 2018 and has saved the city an estimated \$600 million a year since it was implemented.

The contract also eliminates the eight-hour workday for the majority of EMS workers and instead places them in a twelve-hour work schedule, which forces eight hours of overtime bi-weekly, adding up to approximately two hundred hours annually. The forced overtime generates productivity gains for the city administration. Meanwhile, harsh and exploitative work conditions have led to chronic understaffing due to attrition and the consequent difficulty of providing adequate pre-hospital services to the city's residents.

A particularly odious aspect of the contract is the increase in annual contractual work hours from 1,957 to 2,088 hours per year. Once factored in, the increase in annual work hours counteracts the paltry raise in salary by in effect decreasing hourly wages by more than six percent. This accounting trick takes on an especially insidious character in light of the aforementioned forced overtime, which will in fact be worked at a discounted rate, stealing millions of dollars from

workers.

EMS workers must treat this contract with the contempt that it deserves. Workers cannot allow the union to manipulate and coerce them into accepting another rotten deal, especially after the sacrifices and trauma they have had to endure during the pandemic, which is once again being allowed to spread uncontrollably without any mitigation efforts.

Throughout the pandemic, the health care unions, including DC37, have not lifted a finger to improve conditions for health care workers. On the contrary, they did everything they could to preempt and suppress any attempts by workers to fight for their interests. The consequences have been deadly.

Several NYC EMS workers have already succumbed to the COVID-19 pandemic, while PTSD from overwork and overexposure to death and suffering led three EMS workers to commit suicide in 2020. EMS workers employed by the city did not even get hazard pay, despite the city receiving billions of dollars in federal stimulus money.

To date, no one in New York's Democratic Party political establishment has been held accountable for allowing New York to become the epicenter of the first wave of the pandemic. On the contrary, the same Democratic Party politicians are now busy engineering the full return to in-person classroom education in New York City's schools. This is under conditions where hundreds of children are hospitalized every week, and dozens have died. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is fully backing this deadly drive to reopen schools.

Even before the planned school reopening, New York is recording an average of 4,000 new cases every day, despite a substantial decrease in testing. Dozens of people are dying every day.

EMS workers continue to find themselves at the forefront of an intensifying social crisis, in which they are the victims of physical assaults, and injuries due to overwork. EMS and other health care workers must recognize that the unions have long ago ceased to be a vehicle for the advancement of working class interests. At every opportunity, these undemocratic organizations collaborate and collude with management and the Democratic Party in the suppression of workers' rights and struggles.

New organizations of struggle must be created. The

Socialist Equality Party is assisting workers everywhere in the building of an internationally interconnected network of rank-and-file committees to organize a united counter-offensive by the international working class against inequality, exploitation and the homicidal response of the ruling class to the COVID-19 pandemic. EMS workers should take inspiration from the struggle waged by autoworkers at Volvo, who defied the UAW and formed their own independent rank-and-file committee, as well as from teachers in the US and internationally, who have likewise begun to organize independently of the unions and the Democratic Party.

EMS workers cannot wait any longer! If you want to build a rank and file committee among health care workers, contact the SEP today.



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