Municipal workers in New York City vote on sellout tentative agreement

Edwin Hernandez
24 March 2023

Approximately 100,000 workers in District Council 37 (DC 37), New York City's largest public union, are voting on a tentative agreement reached last month with the administration of Mayor Eric Adams. Voting on the deal, which includes massive wage cuts after accounting for inflation, concludes at the end of March.

The tentative agreement is the opening shot in a frontal assault on the living standards of the entire municipal workforce. Beyond the 100,000 workers directly impacted, the deal, if passed, will set the pattern for contracts covering public school teachers, nurses at city-run hospitals, emergency medical service workers, sanitation workers, and other civil servants with expired contracts.

It also marks an escalation of the city's austerity policies, which under Adams, have already led to thousands of municipal job losses, hundreds of millions of dollars in cuts to public schools, and threats to libraries. These local cuts are mirrored in cities and states around the country, at the same time as unlimited funds are made available for war against Russia and the bailout of banks.

In New York, as elsewhere, the Democratic Party is relying on the labor apparatus to beat back demands by workers, not just for wage increases that keep up with inflation, but payback for the horrific health impact and worsening job conditions endured since the pandemic began more than three years ago. Over the past several months, widespread anger at living conditions and opposition to cuts have erupted in strike and protests, from the movement of French workers against pension reforms to the strike this week by Los Angeles teachers.

The terms that the DC 37 apparatus is pushing on the membership include a compounded 16.21 percent wage increase over the five-year period from May of 2021 into 2026, or a 3 percent raise per year over the first four years and a 3.25 percent increase in the last year. These increases fall far behind inflation and represent a hefty pay cut in real terms.

The proposed contract also includes some other, relatively minor items such as a $3,000 signing bonus, $3 million annually to be given to DC 37 to oversee a childcare trust fund, and weak, non-committal language around remote work.

Remote work has emerged as a central issue among many city workers. The insistence of the Adams administration and that of his predecessor, Bill de Blasio, on in-person work since September 2021 has been an especially cruel and arbitrary policy that continues to unnecessarily expose many workers to COVID-19 infection.

The obscure language around creating a commission to study the feasibility of remote work should be a non-starter. The viability of remote work is an already settled matter, with much of the private sector, along with the federal government, having made the shift.

The members of DC 37 are employed by the city in widely varied occupations and earn disparate incomes, with a significant portion, such as school traffic guards and clerical workers, paid the New York state minimum wage.

A clause in the agreement that raises wages for the lowest paid workers from $15 to $18 an hour, still a poverty income, highlights the grossly inadequate character of the proposal.

These conditions have precipitated a staffing crisis, with a net reduction of over 20,000 municipal positions in the last two years, according to a recent report from the New York State Comptroller. The losses, primarily through attrition and low rates of hiring, have led to a drain in experience and overwork amongst the remaining employees, which in turn further fuels

© World Socialist Web Site

employee burnout.

The effects are being felt across most government agencies, but especially those that serve the working class, such as affordable housing, where families are spending extra time in shelters, and nutritional assistance, with delays delivering food to those in need.

Rather than staff city agencies appropriately by improving incomes and working conditions, the Adams administration has permanently cut over 4,300 city positions in order to "trim the budget."

Indeed, with the collusion of the public unions like DC 37 and the United Federation of Teachers, the Adams administration is seeking to impose a ruthless austerity agenda to make the working class pay for an anticipated budget crisis.

In recent months, these forces have been engaged in a relentless campaign to strip the roughly 250,000 retired city workers of their health care benefits and dump them into a Medicare Advantage plan with the stated aim of saving the city $600 million dollars per year.

The privatization of retiree health care, enacted this month, imposes an impossible burden on retirees, many of whom have already inadequate fixed incomes. Medicare Advantage plans are run by for-profit insurance companies that restrict access to treatment and increase out-of-pocket costs by thousands of dollars per year.

The Municipal Labor Committee (MLC), an umbrella organization that negotiates health care on behalf of all the city unions, was one of the main drivers behind the plan. In 2018, the MLC committed to finding savings of $600 million per year for the city and has been looking for various ways to cut workers health care ever since.

The unions have imposed one giveback contract after another on the backs of New York City workers over the past several decades under the pretense of maintaining workers "generous" health care and retirement benefits. The result has been that New York city workers on average now make one third less than their state worker counterparts.

In a move that reveals the reactionary outlook of the union apparatus, the MLC and other New York City unions emerged as vocal opponents of initiatives to develop a single-payer health care system for the state of New York on the bogus grounds that city workers prefer their employer-provided health care.

In a May 5 letter to New York State Senator Stewart-Cousins the MLC wrote: "We have no desire to cede the structure of our health benefits to a large committee in which we would have little representation. ... Over these years we have also sacrificed wage increases to advance quality of care and maintain the current cost structure. Workers have already 'paid' for their benefits. Indeed, because of this economic trade off, we previously suggested that MLC-member workforces be carved out of the statewide bill. Unfortunately, that suggestion has not been included in the current bill."

The unions have emerged as willing accomplices in the stripping away of workers' rights and their impoverishment. The anti-worker labor bureaucracies do not view a living wage, health care, and a pension as social rights to be fought for and defended, but as bargaining chips to be given away if needed to maintain a their "seat at the table" and their highly paid positions.

It is imperative for city workers to not only reject the poverty-perpetuating DC 37 contract but to begin building genuine, democratic organizations to fight for their rights. Municipal workers are in a powerful position to defend their basic rights, but only if they throw off the union apparatus. The Socialist Equality Party has been assisting workers with the critical task of building rank-and-file committees to articulate their interests, establish unity with the broader working class and imbue these struggles with a socialist perspective.

The Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Committee, which is holding a public meeting on Saturday, issued a statement stressing the importance of the DC 37 contract battle. The educators stressed the necessity for city workers to unite with other sections of workers and fight for demands that correspond to the needs of workers, not what the representatives of big business say they can afford. City workers are strongly urged to reach out to the WSWS to join this effort.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site