

Build Rank-and-File Committees!

California state workers vote on concessionary tentative agreement

Our reporters
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Yesterday workers began voting on a tentative agreement for members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1000, representing some 96,000 State of California government workers. The contract that has been agreed to by the union bureaucracy and California Governor Gavin Newsom's administration is full of concessions and a powerful campaign to vote "no" is emerging.

Local 1000 members include some of the lowest paid workers in the state, workers who continue to be ravaged by inflation and the skyrocketing costs of rent in California. Voting begins August 28 and closes Friday, September 8, but only a little more than half of 96,000 members pay dues and are eligible to vote on the deal.

The tentative agreement includes a paltry 3 percent raise once ratified, another 3 percent in July 2024, and another 3 to 4 percent in July 2025. Tellingly, the total raises are being marketed as "10 percent" but in reality the 4 percent raise to be paid in 2025 is dependent on the state budget allowing for it. Thus, in reality, the only guarantee is for annual 3 percent raises.

California has one of the highest costs of living in the country, particularly in major cities where state buildings and business are concentrated. Inflation in the state reached a level of 9.1 percent in June 2022 and remains high, near 5 percent. The annual 3 percent raises are far below the rate of inflation and amount to a significant pay cut.

Local 1000 is an amalgamation of 9 bargaining units consisting of administrative workers, correction workers filling many of the support roles across the extensive state corrections department that include cooks, custodians, teachers and healthcare workers, as well as technicians for the state Department of Transportation, Department of Fish & Wildlife, and printing trades.

A regularly used tactic to ensure upper administration obtains substantial raises is to provide Special Salary Adjustments (SSAs) to a select group of employees. The State claims it uses this to recruit and retain specific

workers, which is contrary to an across the board raise known as a General Salary Increase (GSI).

Adding insult to injury, the union is highlighting the progressiveness of a so-called "Wage Equity Adjustment" that will grant an additional 4 percent raise to all workers that are paid less than \$20 an hour, a large section that covers some 150 job classifications. In reality it will continue to leave the lowest paid employees in poverty and all the paltry raises combined will mean that the majority will continue to make less than \$20 an hour.

To understand how miserably this workforce is paid and how little will be provided by this contract, a Motor Vehicle Assistant, a position that is the backbone of the Department of Motor Vehicles, providing licensing and registration for the 27 million drivers in California, represented by Local 1000, has a starting salary of \$3,110.00/month (\$37,320/year), approximately \$17.94/hour. The TA would result in a 4 percent raise as part of the wage equity adjustment as well as a general salary increase of 3 percent, for a paltry increase to \$3,331/month (\$39,972/year), an additional \$221/month and an hourly rate of \$19.22 for an increase in pay of \$1.28/hour.

Teaching Assistants at state correctional facilities, a position providing educational opportunity for inmates within the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, has a starting salary of \$3,045/month (\$36,540/year), approximately \$17.57/hour. The TA would result in a 4 percent raise as part of the wage equity adjustment as well as a general salary increase of 3 percent, for a paltry increase to \$3,262/month, an additional \$217/month and an hourly rate of \$18.82 for an increase in pay of \$1.25/hour.

State workers will also be paying a substantial increase in healthcare costs. A single person would see their monthly premium for an average healthcare plan increase from \$105.68 to \$217.15, an increase of \$111.47/month (105 percent). A state worker with three or more dependents to

cover would see their premium increase from \$432.97 to \$570.79, an increase of \$137.82 (32 percent).

The parent, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) International, represents some 2 million primarily low wage workers across the health and service sectors. Its origins date back to the organization of janitors, elevator operators and window washers in 1921 in Chicago and was known as the Building Service Employees International Union (BSEIU).

SEIU International focuses on campaigns financed by members dues that include “Fight for 15,” “Airport Workers United,” “Racial Justice,” and “Justice for Janitors.” What all of these false initiatives have in common is that at the end of the day workers remain stuck in poverty.

These toothless campaigns have done nothing to reverse the assault on workers salaries while seeking to inject racial divisions between workers. This is part of the larger tactic of the Democratic Party to focus on identity and sow infighting over crumbs to pit workers against each other on the basis of race and gender rather than unite them against their employer for a living wage or against capitalist inequality and exploitation.

The vast majority of dues are funneled to support Democratic Party politicians at the state and national levels. The centerpiece of the SEIU’s priorities has been the support of the Democratic Party and its politicians, including Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. The union recently announced their endorsement of Joseph Biden’s reelection in the 2024 presidential vote.

Mary Kay Henry, SEIU president, a decades-long bureaucrat within SEIU who worked under its previous president, Andrew Stern, currently earns nearly \$280,000 in total compensation. In a comment on the 2024 presidential election, Henry stated, “The stakes are incredibly high, and we can’t risk the progress we’ve made under the most pro-worker and pro-union president in U.S. history.”

Biden’s claim to be the most “pro-worker” candidate is thoroughly false, in reality his administration is the most “pro-union bureaucracy” in that it is assisting the union bureaucracies with helping to impose concessions contracts on workers. It should be taken as a warning that this is the same administration that rammed through a bill to legalize strike activity by railroad workers this past December 2022 with the full assistance of the rail unions.

Feigning concern for the needs of union members, SEIU Local 1000 hosts town hall meetings throughout the state for workers to talk about their impoverished conditions while allowing a platform for union officials to strike a militant pose. At a recent San Diego town hall, a worker provided a compelling story of crossing back and forth between a job in the US and a home in Tijuana, a burden that tens of

thousands are forced to endure in order to obtain relief from the high cost of living in San Diego. Additionally, numerous state workers continue to report having to live in their cars and being forced to apply for government subsidies to support themselves or a family.

The SEIU for its part is concerned only with asking for the state to increase donations to the union’s political fund known as the Committee on Political Education (COPE) while continually increasing the wealth of the bureaucrats that lead Local 1000. The executive board of Local 1000 recently approved a salary structure that would see the executive director earn \$230,000/year and provide salaries in excess of \$100,000 to an extensive staff.

Workers must recognize they are in a struggle against not only the wealthiest state in the country—the world’s fifth largest global economy—but that they are in a battle with the SEIU bureaucracy as well, which is tied to the very state that insists there is no money either for wages, for public education, for food stamps or to end homelessness.

The contract must be rejected, but this is only the first step. The SEIU bureaucracy will not come back with a better agreement. Instead, workers must independently organize and build rank-and-file committees to lay out their non-negotiable demands for wages and benefits. There must be full transparency and livestreaming of all negotiations. Only in this way can workers prepare a fighting strategy to ensure their demands for a living wage are met.

The rank and file must settle scores with the union bureaucrats once and for all. The rank-and-file committees are counterposed to the union apparatus which keeps workers in the dark and isolated. The committees are tied to the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) in order to link up their struggle with other sections of workers, including striking writers and actors, educators, nurses, dockworkers, freight and transit workers in the US and internationally.

We encourage all state workers to contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party to learn about how to build a rank-and-file committee as the organizational form where workers can fight for their demands, and not what is deemed “affordable” by the state or the ruling capitalist parties.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact