Contract for 90,000 New York City municipal workers expiring, setting stage for fight against Mamdani administration

Erik Schreiber, Daniel de Vries
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New York City municipal workers: tell us what you're fighting for in the new contract by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept confidential.

The contract covering 90,000 New York City municipal workers in AFSCME District Council 37 (DC 37) is set to expire on Friday. The city-wide contract covers 30 percent of the municipal workforce across dozens of locals, including administrative and clerical staff, social service caseworkers, school-based support staff, library workers, IT professionals, and 911 operators across the city's agencies. The contract struggle marks a major new stage in the developing confrontation between the working class and Mayor Zohran Mamdani.

The municipal workforce in New York City has seen this firsthand. The expiring contract provided raises of just 3 percent for the first four years and 3.25 percent in the final year. These "raises" fell well below inflation, which peaked at over 8 percent in 2022. Over the course of the last contract, median housing costs in the city have spiked roughly 32 percent, making the city even less affordable to those who work for it.

The city is a major low-wage employer. The expiring contract set a wage floor of just $18 per hour when it was enacted in July 2023. This miserable wage is only one dollar more than the city's minimum wage—and less than half of a living wage for a single adult with no children. To raise a family on such a wage in New York City is next to impossible.

Despite the urgent need for raises to lift workers out of poverty and cope with the out-of-control cost of living, the DC 37 bureaucracy is collaborating with the Mamdani administration to stall. Negotiations between the union and the city are not even scheduled to begin until the contract expires, an extraordinary repudiation of the principle of "no contract, no work." This has become standard practice by municipal unions in New York, and is intended to wear down workers.

Workers must respond by taking the initiative. This means building a network of rank-and-file committees across the city to oppose the stalling tactics of the union bureaucracy and prepare a genuine fight, under the democratic control of workers themselves.

Mamdani, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, won office on a promise to raise the standard of living for the city's working class, which has suffered through decades of stagnating wages and the dismantling of benefits while the cost of living has soared. However, he promptly began abandoning his campaign pledges even before taking office.

Mamdani has made three fawning appearances with the would-be Führer Donald Trump, arrested anti-genocide protesters outside of the UN General Assembly, dropped his proposal for free bus fare and done everything to reassure the financial elite that he presents no serious challenge to them.

In August, Mamdani filed a lawsuit to block a City Council bill that would give a $10,000 bonus to paraprofessional school aides, who are among the most exploited and worst-paid city workers. Mamdani argues the bonus is illegal because it violates the Taylor Law, the same anti-worker law which bans public sector strikes in the state.

After President Donald Trump, with whom Mamdani boasts of having a partnership, revoked Haitian immigrants' Temporary Protected Status (TPS) as part of his foul campaign of xenophobia, Mamdani promptly fired the Haitian city workers who had been affected. Just weeks earlier, Mamdani had vowed to oppose the revocation of TPS and defend Haitian immigrants.

When 15,000 New York nurses struck in January and February, Mamdani appeared on the picket lines in an empty gesture of support. Meanwhile, his political ally Governor Kathy Hochul signed emergency declarations that brought in scab nurses from out of state. Mamdani responded by endorsing the strikebreaking Hochul for re-election.

Mamdani's fiscal year 2027 budget, adopted this summer, balanced the books on the backs of city workers, delaying repayments to the city's pension system and understaffing schools by bypassing state law requiring lower student-to-teacher ratios. Mamdani also launched a cost-cutting effort across city agencies modeled on Elon Musk's DOGE, adding to widespread understaffing.

Mamdani has assembled an administration with a long track

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record of imposing cuts on city workers. His first deputy mayor is Dean Fuleihan, who, over his 50-year career in Democratic politics, has consistently imposed austerity on city employees on behalf of finance capital. As budget director and first deputy mayor for Democrat Bill de Blasio, Fuleihan collaborated with union bureaucrats to cut city workers' real wages (through 2 percent annual raises) and benefits. He also set the stage for privatizing retirees' healthcare, which was imposed through a backroom deal with city unions, including DC 37.

To cover for his record, Mamdani has established the so-called Mayor's Office of Worker Power. The agency is overseen by Deputy Mayor for Economic Justice Julie Su, Biden's former labor secretary who intervened to push through sellout contracts at the west coast docks and among Boeing machinists. But even this fig leaf explicitly excludes municipal workers on the grounds that it would create a "conflict of interest."

Mamdani's record does not merely expose his own program. It flows from the fact that even the most limited improvements to workers' conditions is possible only through an independent movement of the working class against the corporate oligarchy and its two party system.

The support for a self-described socialist testifies to a radicalization among workers and youth which will go far beyond the boundaries which the Democratic Party, through the DSA, is attempting to impose upon them. New York City has already seen two major strikes this year, the aforementioned nurses strike and the Long Island Rail Road strike in May.

Beyond the city limits, mass protests emerged against the Trump administration's murderous ICE occupation of Minneapolis. And internationally, governments across Europe are being shaken by ongoing mass student protests and major strike action.

The conditions exist for a powerful unified struggle by municipal workers in the city. Tens of thousands of transit workers have been without a contract since May, and are facing the same demands to sacrifice yet again despite their vital role in the functioning of a city with obscene wealth flowing through Wall Street and corporate boardrooms. Emergency Medical Service workers, who are covered under a separate DC-37 contract, have been without an agreement, and without a raise, since 2022. Fire Department EMTs start just above the city's wage floor, a poverty-level wage that results in rapid turnover. Conditions for workers throughout New York are reaching an impasse.

Building such a movement requires a fight against the pro-capitalist Democratic Party and the trade union apparatus. The DC 37 apparatus has a decades-long history of class collaboration and corruption. In the mid-1970s, when New York City was on the verge of bankruptcy, DC 37 President Victor Gotbaum agreed to defer raises that had already been negotiated. He also agreed to invest $3 billion in union pension funds to bail out the city and the banks. Gotbaum's concessions set a pattern that other municipal unions followed. This event marked the DC 37 bureaucracy's transformation into the enforcer of austerity on behalf of the capitalist state and the financial oligarchy.

In the late 1990s, more than 30 local leaders pleaded guilty to or were convicted on charges of embezzlement and rigging a 1996 contract vote. DC 37 officials stuffed ballot boxes to convert the rejection of the tentative agreement into its ratification. The agreement in question froze wages for two years and introduced a two-tier wage system. Adding insult to injury, union officials gave themselves raises of as much as $55,000 in the same agreement.

The DC 37 bureaucracy has established cozy relationships with politicians of both big business parties. Stanley Hill, the union's leader from 1987 to 1998, backed Democrat Jesse Jackson when he ran for president in 1988. Without batting an eye, Hill later supported reactionary Republican Rudolph Giuliani for mayor in the mid-1990s.

The DC 37 bureaucracy's negotiations with Mamdani will be friendly, not adversarial. They have made no effort to mobilize workers for the contract struggle, limiting their calls to a monthly "Day of Action" on which members are encouraged to wear union buttons, hang signs in their workplaces, and wear green.

New York City's municipal workers will not be able to take one step forward without wresting control of their struggle from the self-dealing bureaucrats who claim to represent them. City workers must form rank-and-file committees across the city, excluding union functionaries and subject to workers' democratic control.

Through these committees, city workers will be able to develop a fighting strategy and reach out to other sections of the working class for support. All workers in New York face the same impossible cost of living and will respond to city workers' appeal. Ultimately, the contract struggle raises the question of who controls society. City workers must fight to end the domination of finance capital and establish workers' control.

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