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The Working Class Begins to Fight Back

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After decades of losing ground and feeling helpless, working people are beginning to fight back. This development has emerged in part because the Occupy Wall Street movement has thrown a national spotlight on the growing inequalities in wealth and the mainstream politicians who have enabled this trend to continue for decades. The Occupy Wall Street movement drew the obvious conclusion: meaningful change will happen, not by endless waiting for the politicians to act, but by working people relying on themselves and acting collectively.

The ILWU (International Longshore and Warehouse Union) in the Longview, Washington area, for example, has announced that it will put up a fight to resist the union-busting maneuvers of EGT Development, which is reneging on a previous agreement to use ILWU workers. The union has put out a “Call to Action,” appealing to all working people to come to their aid in order to stop EGT Development from loading grain without the ILWU workers. The union leaders rightfully argue that the EGT effort to shift the work away from the ILWU workers is an attack on all working people, because the ILWU is one of the strongest unions in the country, it has engaged in job actions in support of working people throughout the country and the world, and there was a previous agreement that these were ILWU jobs.

Meanwhile in California the battle lines are forming around a different issue: competing ballot measures that would increase the state’s revenue by raising taxes.

After public education suffered debilitating cuts during the past 5 years, the California Federation of Teachers (CFT) has valiantly stood up and proposed a measure that would raise taxes on people making more than \$1 million by 3 percent and those making more than \$2 million by 5 percent. The money raised would be earmarked for public education and vital social services, and there would be no expiration date on this tax increase, if it passes.

Governor Jerry Brown’s proposal stands on the other side of the class divide. He is supporting a measure that would increase taxes on people who make more than \$250,000 by 1 percent and those making over \$500,000 by 2 percent. But he has also included an increase in the sales tax by one-half cent, and the entire tax package includes an expiration date of 2016. The money has not been earmarked for public education or vital social services.

While Brown’s proposal might seem to have a progressive component by raising taxes on the wealthy, he in fact is doing everything he can to protect the rich. The California Democratic Party, of which Jerry Brown is a leading member, has gone on record favoring raising taxes on everyone but the richest 1 percent (San Francisco Chronicle, August 4, 2010). But Brown is also well aware of strong public sentiment (over 60 percent) in favor of raising taxes on the rich and equally strong public opposition to additional cuts to education. According to the San Jose Mercury News, Brown conceded that an increase in the sales tax was not popular, but he included it because “I thought we ought to have a balanced program.” (December 16, 2011).

With a stubborn budget deficit and polls wildly favoring increased taxes on the rich, Brown was compelled to propose increasing their taxes. But his tax proposal represents the most minimal concession to popular sentiment. If it passes, the wealthy would suffer a miniscule increase in their taxes, but only temporarily because of the expiration date packed into the proposal. The increase in the sales tax — the most insidious part of Brown’s proposal — is fundamentally regressive, meaning that it would constitute a heavier burden on the poorest members of society and the lightest burden on the wealthiest.

Brown’s description of his tax measure as “a balanced program” is surely disingenuous. Between 1978 and 2008 the incomes of the wealthiest 1 percent of Californians grew 81 percent while the income of the bottom 20 percent dropped by 11.5 percent (San Francisco Chronicle, April 1, 2011). A “balanced program” would have raised taxes on

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the wealthiest by 81 percent and lowered taxes on the bottom 20 percent by 11.5 percent. But Brown's sentiments clearly lie with the top 1 percent, not the bottom 99 percent, let alone the bottom 20 percent.

These competing tax measures, in the most rudimentary respect, represent the emergence of class struggle politics, and the people of California will be forced to take sides. In fact, some have already taken a stand. Because of the unpopularity of the sales tax and the mild increase in taxes on the wealthy, Jerry Brown has hoped to draw in the support of working people by putting pressure on top state union officials to reject the CFT initiative and support Brown's counter proposal. The statewide Service Employees International Union (SEIU) officials have bowed to the pressure. Whether some of the SEIU locals might rebel and refuse to follow has yet to be seen. After all, the rank and file are the ones who lose their jobs when there are budget deficits and cuts are made, and it is not clear that Brown's proposal will protect any of them.

Meanwhile students and teachers in California are organizing massive actions in the spring to demand full funding for public education and social services by taxing the rich. On March 1 they are planning actions on campuses across the state, where each campus will define its own event. Then on March 5 all will converge on Sacramento to occupy the State Capitol. They are rejecting the long-discredited approach of hoping that politicians will throw them a few crumbs, since this policy has seemed to produce just the opposite of its intended effect: year after year public education and social service budgets have been slashed. Teachers have been laid off, class size has risen, university tuition has skyrocketed, state workers have been laid off and social services have been gutted. The San Francisco Labor Council and UPTA (University Professional and Technical Employees) have already endorsed these events with a strong resolution, and various union locals are in the process of doing the same. The San Francisco Labor Council and those organizing for March 1 and 5 have also endorsed CFT's tax on millionaires.

The sides are being drawn: the 1 percent with its opulent reservoir of wealth is on one side, and the 99 percent — the vast majority of the population — is on the other. Whereas the 1 percent derives its power from money, the 99 percent will derive power from their overwhelming numbers. In organizing massive demonstrations to insist on the implementation of a different set of priorities, the 99 percent will be exercising independent political action, they will be relying on themselves and acting collectively, and they will be taking a first step in the direction of shifting the balance of power from the 1 percent to the 99 percent. And in the process they will be insisting that society function as a true democracy: in the interests of the majority.

PS:

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