

Philadelphia transit workers to vote on tentative pact

Alan White, Ken Desmond
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Philadelphia Transit workers are scheduled to vote today on a tentative settlement that ended a 40-day strike, despite reports of disagreements between the union and management as to what it is that they agreed on. The strike ended July 10 when the Transport Workers Union Local 234 and the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) reached an unwritten handshake agreement.

The remaining differences revolve around the issues of the use of part-time drivers, and changes in workers compensation. The union has just begun distributing an eight-page brochure presenting to the membership their interpretation of the settlement. Union leaders have stated that even without a final written agreement, they will conduct balloting among the 5,500 union members on Friday. In other words, the members will be told to vote on a contract that doesn't really exist. It is possible that the union and management could sign a written agreement later that differs significantly from what the workers believe they are voting on.

The continuous disagreement between the two sides helps explain why both the union and management have released very little about the details of the oral agreement to the media. It is known that the workers won a 3 percent wage increase for each year for three years, but this will be more than paid for, during the life of the contract, by all the money that SEPTA saved in not paying wages and benefits to the workers during the strike. The Transit Authority is able to do this because it was collecting taxes during the same period that the transportation system serving almost 450,000 passengers was shut down.

The workers won a increase in their pension, but this will be paid for by a lengthening of the amount of time, from 30 to 48 months, that it takes newly hired workers to reach top pay. That is, the sweat and misery of the

new hires will pay for increased pension benefits for the older workers, sharpening the divisions among the rank-and-file.

SEPTA won various work-rule changes giving it greater authority to assign and transfer workers. It also won the right to immediately fire any drivers who fail a drug test after violating certain safety rules such as running a signal. Workers who fail a random drug test will get a second chance to pass.

The union had reported that SEPTA's demand for 100 part-timers would be settled in binding arbitration. However, management is claiming that the issue being presented to the arbitrator goes much further.

The demand for part-timers who would get less pay and benefits than the current all full-time work force was one of the most contentious issues during the strike. TWU Local 234 President Steve Brookens had declared that he would never allow SEPTA to hire part-timers. Yet three days into the strike the union leadership put forward as its main demand that the entire contract dispute be placed before binding arbitration. SEPTA initially rejected this, and now the union leadership is portraying arbitration on the issue of part-timers as though it were a victory.

The other unresolved issue is over the extent of the limits being placed on how long members receive health and welfare benefits while on worker's compensation. Previously, there had been no limit on contractual benefits for employees injured while on duty.

See Also:
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