

5,000 Philadelphia transit workers walk out

Alan Whyte
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Thousands of transit workers walked off their jobs in Philadelphia shortly after midnight Monday in a dispute over wages and benefits with the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA).

The 5,000 subway, trolley and bus workers are represented by Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 234; 300 suburban transit employees organized by United Transportation Union (UTU) Local 1594 are also on strike. The strike affects some 460,000 commuters in the Philadelphia area. Employees at SEPTA's commuter rail system have a different union contract and are continuing to work.

The union membership voted unanimously to authorize strike action when the contract expired on March 15. The Local 234 leadership subsequently asked SEPTA to extend the contract several times until June 15.

While SEPTA is the fifth-largest transit authority in the country, the Philadelphia transit workers, who have not had a pay raise since December 2003, rank 20th in terms of their wage scale, according to TWU Local 234 President Jeff Brooks. The union rejected management's offer of a 9 percent wage increase over three years, claiming that the raise would be offset by SEPTA's demand that workers pay 5 percent of health care premiums.

Transit workers currently do not pay any portion of their health care benefits. In response to management's insistence that workers bear the brunt for escalating health care costs, Brooks claimed that health care provider "Blue Cross makes millions every month. They have billions in reserve. They play politics at the highest level. And, they spend their money where they get the best return. The politicians know it." In past contracts, states Brooks, "union members have accepted less in wages and benefits in a deal made with SEPTA for health care."

SEPTA is also demanding more than 90 different

givebacks that include reducing vacation time, reducing overtime pay, eliminating the contract's no-layoff clause, reducing sick pay benefits, reducing injury-on-duty benefits and eliminating maternity leave. The transit workers' walkout is a continuation of the struggle against concession demands by SEPTA that provoked the bitter strike in 1998.

At that time, workers struck for 40 days and obtained a 3 percent wage increase for each year of a three-year contract. The increase was primarily financed from savings accrued by SEPTA in unpaid wages and benefits during the period of the walkout itself. Furthermore, the gains made in pension benefits were offset by an extension of the time required for new hires to reach top pay. Other concessions included work-rule changes giving SEPTA greater authority to transfer and reassign workers, as well as the right to immediately fire drivers who fail drug testing after violating certain safety rules. The authority's overall goal was to restructure the transit system by reducing service and eliminating union jobs.

Pressure exerted on representatives of TWU local 234 by local Democratic politicians and the Philadelphia AFL-CIO bureaucracy contributed to ending the 1998 strike.

Shortly after the transit workers' contract was first extended in March 2005, local president Brooks was appointed to Democratic Governor Ed Rendell's Transportation Funding and Reform Commission. Rendell was Philadelphia's mayor during the 1998 strike and openly sided with SEPTA. Local 234's web site boasts of this appointment.

Brooks himself recently noted that it was "the governor's best friends [the Ballard Spahr law firm] who gutted the city workers in the 1992 negotiations" by forcing them "to accept a contract that included *zero* percent raises, the loss of holidays and the reduction of their health care benefits." He further said that these

were the same people behind the “1998 SEPTA negotiations that delivered us the 40-day strike.”



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