

More than 5,000 Philadelphia transit workers continue walkout

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About 5,300 subway, trolley, and bus workers in Philadelphia are continuing their strike after walking off their jobs on Monday, October 31. The major issues provoking the walkout against the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) are wages and benefits. About 300 union members held a noontime rally Friday, vowing to stay out until they win. Currently, there are no negotiations taking place between the two sides, and none are planned.

SEPTA's major giveback demand is that all current workers contribute 5 percent of their health insurance and that all future hires contribute 10 percent for their health care premiums. Currently, all employees after two years and three months of employment do not pay for their premiums. However, new hires have no health benefits for the first 90 days; they then contribute 30 percent of the premiums for the first year and 20 percent for their second year of employment.

The agency is also seeking to increase co-payments whenever an employee visits a doctor's office or goes to the hospital. The transit authority officials claim that these givebacks in workers' health benefits are needed to cover an increase of 15 percent in the premiums in the last three years, and that they are facing 18 percent increases in the next two years in order to maintain the current level of health benefits for employees.

However, leaders of Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 234, which represents the workers, have said that Blue Cross makes millions of dollars every month and has billions of dollars in reserve. Moreover, the 9 percent wage hike over three years that SEPTA is offering would be offset by management's demand that the workers contribute 5 or 10 percent of the premiums for health care.

Workers charge that SEPTA is seeking a contribution now in order to open the door to greater sacrifices of

health benefits in future contracts. The union has complained that its members have already sacrificed better wage increases in past contracts for good health benefits and that now SEPTA is violating the previous agreement.

The media and local politicians are applying pressure to end the walkout. The city's two biggest daily newspapers, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Philadelphia Daily News*, both wrote editorials criticizing the strike.

Meanwhile, former governor Mark S. Schweiker, who heads the pro-corporation Council for Growth, has said that the strike could be costing as much as \$1.5 million a day. He maintains that the major impact of the walkout is from the lost of tourism and convention business. He threatened that the organization's goal to establish permanent funding for mass transit is now being placed in danger by transit workers on strike.

Democratic Governor Ed Rendell has also said that the strike is "killing" any chance of getting regular funding to end the transit agency's budget crises. The governor has insisted that negotiations between the two sides must continue and said he plans to meet separately with both the union and SEPTA to end the strike.

Rendell also said that workers should pay for their health care premiums as SEPTA is demanding, but that payments should be based on how much an employee earns. The governor made his position clear when he said, "The union has to understand that there is not one iota of public support for a position that 'we [the workers] shouldn't be paying part of our healthcare.'"

The spokesman for the union, Bob Bedard, responded, "What SEPTA has asked for is that employees make a contribution to cover health care costs. We have agreed to do that."

The spokesman added that the union “is very grateful that the governor weighed in on the side of fairness.” In reality, Rendell’s position is in continuity with his role as mayor of Philadelphia in 1998 when he openly sided with SEPTA against the transit workers during a 40-day strike.



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