

Transit workers strike in Philadelphia

Bill Van Auken
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More than 5,000 subway, bus and trolley operators and mechanics went on strike early Tuesday morning in Philadelphia after talks broke off between Transport Workers Union Local 234 and the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority (SEPTA).

The transit workers voted unanimously on October 25 to authorize a strike, but the union leadership rescinded the threat after Pennsylvania's Democratic governor, Ed Rendell, intervened.

Rendell ordered the union to continue negotiations and not stage a walkout or face "serious consequences." Both city and state officials were determined to prevent a strike as the Philadelphia Phillies and the New York Yankees were playing three games of the World Series in the city on Saturday, Sunday and Monday.

Tuesday's walkout before the morning rush hour shut down a system that provides nearly a million rides each workday, stranding many trying to get to their jobs.

The 5,100 workers have been without a contract since last March, while negotiations have been ongoing since last December.

Local 234 President Willie Brown said that the strike was provoked by management's "fudging the numbers" on the workers' pension plan, which would be left underfunded by the proposed contract.

"SEPTA has looted our pension plan and we cannot stand for that," Brown said. "They have the money. We cannot allow SEPTA to hide behind the economy for not giving us a fair contract."

The union official claimed credit for keeping his members on the job during the World Series, declaring that they acted as "professionals." Over the weekend, he acknowledged that "I will have to take my lumps from my members" for bowing to Rendell's demand and surrendering the leverage provided by the series. The strike was called shortly after the Phillies won Game 5, with the series moving to Yankee Stadium in

New York.

Other issues in the contract dispute include wages and SEPTA management's attack on the longstanding right of transit workers to pick their jobs on the basis of seniority.

SEPTA has offered a five-year contract with no wage increase in the first year, a 2.5 percent hike in the second, and 3 percent increases in the final three years. The union had demanded 4 percent increases for each year of the contract.

The last SEPTA strike in 2005 lasted one week, while a 1998 walkout continued for 40 days.

Tuesday morning's walkout provoked expressions of outrage from Governor Rendell and Philadelphia's Democratic mayor, Michael Nutter. The thrust of the attack by both officials was the insistence that workers cannot demand decent wages or benefits because of the economic crisis.

Rendell described the contract, which does not even match the rate of inflation over the past five years, as "sensational," given that it was offered during "the worst recession since the Great Depression itself."

He claimed that the transit workers should be grateful to get anything, given that in the private sector "many people have seen their wages stay flat or be reduced and most people are losing their pensions and being asked to pay higher contributions for their health insurance."

The workers, he added, were "not in touch with the economic reality affecting all of the US." The governor threatened to withdraw \$6 million in state funds that he had offered for the contract if the strike is not brought to a swift halt.

Mayor Nutter sounded the same theme, calling the strike "an outrageous action" and "irrational," while pointing to Philadelphia's 11 percent unemployment rate as a reason for transit workers to curb their demands.

“People are taking furloughs, pay cuts and the like,” said Nutter. “No reasonable, rational person right now is thinking about a raise, is thinking about an increase in their pension when other members of the general public and other Americans are losing their jobs.”

Nutter made this statement the same day that it was revealed that top US corporate executives had increased their own pensions on average by 19 percent last year, even as company profits and stock prices plummeted.

These attacks by the city and state Democratic officials on the Philadelphia transit workers are in line with the policies of the corporations and the Obama administration. They are deliberately exploiting mass unemployment to instill fear over the shrinking job market and push through cuts in wages and benefits and basic social programs in order to effect a massive redistribution of wealth from working people to the banks and financial elite.

The walkout in Philadelphia is another indication that workers are prepared to defy these threats and fight to defend their jobs and living standards.



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