

Philadelphia transit worker killed as SEPTA strike enters third day

A reporting team
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A Philadelphia transit worker was fatally struck by a train Thursday morning as the strike by 5,000 SEPTA train, bus and trolley drivers and mechanics entered its third day.

Killed in the incident was Kevin Spars, a track inspector and eight-year veteran at the transit agency. According to reports, the worker was hit by a southbound train that had been switched to the northbound track because of an earlier equipment failure. The train reportedly came around a curve at full speed.

It was the second incident in two days to disrupt SEPTA regional commuter lines, which are not part of the strike. On Tuesday, a train packed with 700 passengers caught fire just short of the Overbrook station. SEPTA officials attributed the incident to an electrical malfunction.

The transit agency was quick to deny that the strike had anything to do with either incident, while a SEPTA spokesman suggested that the death was caused by negligence on the part of the track worker. "It's a set procedure," he said. "The people working on tracks know that's a possibility at all times and assume trains will be coming from either direction."

The worker's tragic death underscored the dangers and toll that the job takes on the transit system's workers.

While politicians and the media have vilified the transit workers as "greedy" and "irrational" for striking while the economy is in recession and other workers are losing their jobs, the workers are defending the action, expressing anger at the unequal and abusive treatment they receive from SEPTA management.

In particular, workers are opposed to the agency's demand that they contribute more to their pensions, charging that the SEPTA is trying to force them to pay for the agency's bad investments. They also point out that SEPTA has left their pension plan underfunded, while contributing far more to the fund for management, which pays far greater benefits.

On Thursday afternoon, officials of Transport Workers Union Local 234 met with Governor Ed Rendell and Democratic Congressman Robert Brady to discuss the dispute. Rendell indicated that he and the congressman were serving as intermediaries between the union and SEPTA management. Rendell said that the discussion involved "restructuring the contract without adding additional costs." The union was set to meet again with Rendell late Thursday evening.

Local 234's president, Willie Brown, denounced Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter, referring to him at a press conference as "Little Caesar" and charging that he had "brought nothing to the table but dissension." The union official drew a distinction between the mayor and Governor Rendell, although both have denounced the strike. When Rendell was mayor of Philadelphia in 1998, he kept SEPTA workers on the picket lines for 40 days.

The argument made by both Rendell and Nutter, as well as by the media, is that because other workers have lost their jobs or are seeing their pay and benefits cut, that transit workers have no right to defend their own wages and benefits. In striking, the SEPTA workers have rejected this position, which is aimed at driving down labor costs and making workers pay for the crisis created by the profit system.

The World Socialist Web Site spoke to striking SEPTA workers at Philadelphia's Fern Rock Transportation Center on Wednesday.

Jerome McIntyre, who has worked in SEPTA construction for 19 years, told the WSWS that management had provoked the strike by walking away from the bargaining table as soon as the World Series games had moved from Philadelphia to New York. Rendell had pressured the union into staying on the job during the games, threatening that there would be "serious consequences" if they walked out.

"Before that, it looked like we would sign a contract," he said. "Then they fudged the numbers. They want to pay our wages from our pension funds."

He said that unequal treatment over sick leave was also an issue that angered rank and file workers. "If we get sick, we do not get paid for three days and then get paid one fourth of our pay on the fourth day," he said. "But management gets full pay when they are out sick. In case of a death in the family, we get three days off, but management gets five days."

Sidney Freeman, train operator who has worked at SEPTA for 20 years said that the pension was a key issue. "They say that they lost a lot of money in their investments and so they want us to pay for that," he said. "SEPTA is a public agency—why are they investing public money? The union does not run the pension system, SEPTA does. The agency has been losing money since the collapse of Bear Stearns. They lost \$200 million in bad investments. The union warned them to make safer, more conservative investments. SEPTA has not paid into the pension system for two years. Somebody needs to look at their books."

He added that, while SEPTA was insisting that the economic crisis made it impossible to meet the workers' demands, it has actually had the effect of increasing the agency's revenues. "The economic crisis has not forced ridership to go down, but rather it has increased," he said. "The high gas prices have forced people out of their cars and into the transit system. These prices are still high in this city. Ridership has gone up 35,000 people per week."

"The city and state politicians are not the friend of any worker," said the train operator. "The mayor does not want to give city workers any raises, but he did get an increase in the sales tax."

Ron Williams, a train operator with SEPTA for 24 years, told the WSWS, "From two contracts ago, we have given up \$30 million dollars in concessions. We have gone without a raise for about the last two years. Does SEPTA appreciate this? No, they do not—and now they want even more. All they want to do is make workers work harder for less money. For example, the agency introduced one person train operation in 1994 (OPTO). Now the entire system is OPTO. The conductor has been eliminated, and as result, there have been a lot of fatalities."

"We have been going backwards and making concessions since at least 1993, when we lost our cost-of-living allowance. In 2005, we gave up wage hikes so that

we would not have to pay more than 1 percent of our wages in health benefits."

He added, "SEPTA stated that they would run extra trains and busses to accommodate the riders and relieve all the congestion. They lied and never did anything to relieve the congestion that the passengers are now enduring. They hurt both the passengers and the workers who make the system function every day."

Joe Harrison, a train operator and 39-year veteran at SEPTA, also pointed to the unequal status between labor and management on the pension issue.

"We pay twice as much as management does into our pension, and they get twice as much in pension benefits," he said. "If you are a transit worker for 25-30 years, and are single, or your wife pre-deceases you, or you have a homosexual partner and die shortly after you finished working; all that money that you might have gotten goes right back into the pension fund. That is not right—it should go to the next of kin. After all, you worked all that time, which builds up the pension, and so your family should get some benefit. Our pension benefits are capped; while management has no cap on their pension."

The veteran train operator also pointed to the political issues in the strike and the alliance between the TWU bureaucracy and the Democratic Party.

"Union leaders are always supporting anti-worker politicians," he said. "Democratic Governor Rendell, when he was the mayor of Philadelphia, engaged in union busting against the city workers. As a result, city workers lost their job security, and the city hires a lot of temporary and part-timers who get less pay than what the city was paying before. He also forced us out on strike for 40 days. This is the same man that the Transport Workers Union told us to support for governor

"We don't have a two-party system in this country but a one-party system. The super-rich control the markets, and Wall Street controls Obama."



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