

# Obama administration halts Philadelphia railway strike

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President Obama signed an executive order on Saturday forcing back to work two union locals on strike against the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority's (SEPTA) commuter rail service, which carries about 60,000 commuters a day.

Obama's order—essentially a presidential act of strikebreaking—came less than one day after the workers walked off the job in a dispute over pay and benefits.

After an appeal from Pennsylvania's Republican governor, Tom Corbett, Obama ordered the workers back to work under the provisions of the Railway Labor Act, a reactionary set of laws enacted in 1926. The action created a Presidential Emergency Board (PEB), which will ban the workers from striking for another 240 days while a mediation process goes forward.

More than 200 electricians from the International Brotherhood of Electricians (IBEW) Local 744 and 220 locomotive engineers from the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) Division 71 began their strike at 12:01 a.m. Saturday, briefly shutting down service on 13 commuter rail lines in the Philadelphia area.

The immediate cause of the strike, the first on the commuter lines in 31 years, was SEPTA's threat to unilaterally impose its own contract proposals in a years-long dispute over wages and pensions. In order to create parity in pension contributions with 6,000 other SEPTA workers, both unions are requesting a 3 percent raise beyond SEPTA's proposed 11.5 percent raise for engineers and 9.5 raise for electricians. The unions are also seeking to apply the raises retroactively to 2009, when the last contract expired.

The federal intervention to halt the strike has few precedents in recent years, although in November Obama appointed a PED to mediate a dispute between

Long Island Rail Road workers and the Metropolitan Transit Authority in New York. Federal intervention from National Labor Relations Board was also requested by New York City's then-mayor Michael Bloomberg in January 2013 during the New York City school bus strike. The NLRB decided to allow the strike to proceed, in anticipation that the federal government could depend on the unions involved to help defeat the strike.

Prior to the strike in Philadelphia, the unions made it clear that they would welcome state intervention. In a letter to members, BLET National Division President Dennis Pierce claimed that SEPTA's actions were aimed at stopping the formation of a strikebreaking PEB: "The Carrier [SEPTA] is afraid of a formal investigation of this dispute by an unbiased tribunal — such as an Arbitration Board or a Presidential Emergency Board."

As the rail workers walked off the job, the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 234 facilitated the strike-breaking. Local 234, which includes SEPTA subway and bus operators in Philadelphia, has been working without a contract and has not met with SEPTA management for negotiations since April. In spite of having a strike authorization vote, Local 234 President Willie Brown told the media that a commuter railway strike "wouldn't affect us," and that the local would not strike in support of the commuter rail workers.

As always the aim of the unions is to isolate the workers and, working closely with the state, to impose management's terms.



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