

Philadelphia transit workers vote to strike

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19 October 2016

Bus, subway and trolley operators, cashiers and mechanics voted unanimously last Sunday to shut down Philadelphia's transit system if a new labor agreement is not reached before the old contract expires at midnight on October 31. According to Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 234, in a second vote workers rejected any extension of the contract that would compel them to work without a new agreement.

The primary issues in dispute involve pensions, health care, and working conditions. If a walkout by 5,700 transit workers took place it would begin November 1 and would shut down Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) in Philadelphia, the nation's fifth largest rapid-transit system. The city transportation system has nearly 300 stations, 196 routes, 2,300 vehicles (buses, trolleys, and vans) and more than 450 miles of track.

If the dispute is not settled within a week of a walkout, it could disrupt voting on Election Day on November 8. SEPTA's Regional Rail service in areas outside Philadelphia would not be affected.

A spokeswoman for SEPTA, Carla Showell-Lee, has said, "the parties continue to bargain to reach a new agreement...we hope the union does not exercise its right to strike." She also said a strike vote is not unusual and the vote does not mean a strike will actually occur.

After strikes in 2005 and 2009, a two-year pact signed by the TWU prevented a strike in 2014. The TWU, which is aligned with Democratic mayors that run many of America's big cities, has worked hard to suppress opposition from Philadelphia transit workers, who have a long, militant tradition. If a strike does take place, it would be the tenth in SEPTA'S 50-year history, the most of any transit agency in the country.

The transit agency has issued no immediate contingency travel plan if the walkout takes place.

Negotiations for a new contract officially began on

July 13, but union officials say they have actually been negotiating for a couple of years. TWU Local 234 President Willie Brown complained, "we've been stonewalled by SEPTA management and their team of outside lawyers." In terms of a walkout, Brown said, "that's the only tool we have available to us. We don't have binding arbitration."

While binding arbitration is a blatant attack on the democratic rights of workers, which always favors the most powerful financial interests that hold the debt of municipalities and transit systems, it has also provided a cover for the union bureaucracy, which claims that it has no choice but to accept the concessions imposed by an arbitrator.

As a result of New York State legislation, TWU Local 100 in New York City is prohibited from striking and both workers and the union can face financially penalties for defying the law. Local 100 has accepted binding arbitration and the stripping of workers' right to strike.

In Philadelphia, Local president Brown has complained that while top management gets "rich retirement benefits," they are demanding cuts from the workers. The union also says they are seeking to increase the cap from \$50,000 to \$70,000 on which pensions are calculated. The union also claims to be seeking higher wages.

According to union sources, the transit agency wants to impose inferior health benefits that would reduce sick leave and limit coverage.

There are also fatigue and safety issues. It has been noted that the operators suffer from a lack of rest-time, or what in the industry is called layover time, in between scheduled runs or trips. This creates fatigue especially for the newer employees who due to a lack of seniority have more varied and difficult schedules. This is clearly just as much a safety issue for the riders, since proper rest is necessary for the worker to operate

the vehicle at optimal safety.

Columnists have already started, as they have in the past, to pit the transit workers against the riding public.

However, there is an important difference this year, as is shown by the increased militancy of workers against the corporate concession demands. In Pennsylvania alone, musicians at the Philadelphia Orchestra ended a walkout on October 2, a strike by fellow musicians at the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra has just led to the cancellation of concerts for the next month, and 5,000 faculty and staff members at 15 state-run universities in Pennsylvania State have threatened to walk out today.

The growth of strikes—which also include a walkout by Toledo, Ohio glass workers and Jim Beam whiskey workers in Kentucky—underscores the fact that workers do not believe the election of either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump will do anything to stop the relentless attack on their living standards, which accelerated under the Obama administration. The so-called economic recovery has produced a boom on Wall Street and in corporate profits, but workers continue to see their wages stagnate or fall, even as the employers, backed by Obama’s misnamed Affordable Care Act, shift the cost of health care onto their backs.

The Transport Workers Union, with 116,000 members, has used its resources to boost the election fortunes of Hillary Clinton, who along with her husband, former US President Bill Clinton, has made millions in speaking fees for doing the bidding of Wall Street. A struggle by Philadelphia transit workers, however, will thrust them into a political confrontation with the Democratic Party.



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