

Philadelphia transit workers go on strike

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1 November 2016

Nearly 5,000 transit workers in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania launched an open-ended strike after the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 234 and the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) failed to reach an agreement by midnight on Monday.

The strike has shut down the city's buses, trolleys and subways, which carry an estimated half a million people a day, essentially paralyzing the city. The action by transit workers is the latest indication of growing opposition among workers throughout the country.

Philadelphia, with a population of 1.5 million, is the 5th largest city in the US. Its transportation system has nearly 300 stations, 196 routes, 2,300 vehicles and more than 450 miles of track. The region's suburban bus lines and rail lines are still operating.

One of the major issues in the strike is pensions. Workers' pensions are capped at \$50,000 a year. If employees work past that cap, they continue to contribute into the pension system, but get no additional retirement benefit from it. Management personnel, on the other hand, do not have a cap on their pension benefits. The union has said that it wants to increase the cap on workers pensions to \$70,000.

The transit agency had also demanded that workers accept a major increase in their health care costs, not including co-pays, prescriptions, dental, vision and life insurance. The union had said that if it accepted SEPTA's proposal, it would cost a worker \$400 a month for family coverage, 11 times as much as they do now, to get the same benefits.

The TWU indicated it was seeking some modification of SEPTA's position on pensions in order to be able to sell significant health care cuts to transit workers.

Workers are also seeking better break and bathroom times, along with other improvements in working conditions. For economic reasons, management wants to obtain maximum productivity from its operating

workers by imposing schedules that keep them operating the vehicles for as long as possible. They therefore seek to keep break time at the barest minimum, no matter how dangerous the resulting fatigue may be to both the drivers and transit riders.

As part of the politicians' attempt to divide transit employees from the workers and young people that ride the system, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf, a Democrat, said before the strike began, "There are hundreds, I think hundreds of thousands of people in the city of Philadelphia who depend on SEPTA, and a strike would be a disaster."

Philadelphia Democratic City Council President Darrell Clarke darkly suggested that voters would be disenfranchised if a walkout continued to Election Day on November 8. "I cannot stress enough how critical this coming election is to Pennsylvania and the entire country," he said in a statement. "It is so important that every Pennsylvanian who intends to vote is able to exercise this sacred right."

While the TWU had suggested that the proximity of the US presidential election provided them a bargaining advantage, in reality the TWU is firmly committed to supporting the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. It is well aware that a prolonged walkout could interfere with the union's get-out-the-vote campaign for the Democrats as well as potentially embarrass the Obama administration.

The Philadelphia transit workers have a long and militant history of struggle. They have conducted nine strikes in the last 50 years, the most against any transit agency in the country.

The union threatened a strike two years ago, but an eleventh-hour deal was reached, averting a walkout. However, the union did strike in 2009 for six days and before that for a week. In 1998, workers walked off their jobs for 40 days, the longest transit strike in the city's history.

The struggle of transit workers follows strikes by musicians in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, as well as educators in the Pennsylvania state system. Other recent struggles have involved 5,000 nurses in Minneapolis, Minneapolis; Harvard food workers in Boston, Massachusetts; Toledo, Ohio glass workers and almost 40,000 Verizon communication workers in a strike earlier this year.

Under conditions of growing anger and opposition in the working class, the AFL-CIO has worked to suppress struggles and, when strikes are called, isolate the workers involved and impose the demands of management. The actions of the unions are bound up with their support for the capitalist system and their political alliance with the Democratic Party, which, no less than the Republicans, is determined to escalate the attack on the wages and benefits of the working class.



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