

Officials threaten court action against Philadelphia transit strikers

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As more than 4,700 Philadelphia transit workers walked off their jobs on Tuesday morning, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) threatened court action if the walkout continues into Election Day, November 8.

The powerful strike shut down the city's buses, trolleys and subways, which provide about 900,000 rides a day. The walkout took place after the expiration of the old contract on October 31. Workers had previously voted overwhelmingly to strike and against any effort by the union and management to extend the old contract.

SEPTA is demanding draconian cutbacks on health and pension benefits of workers. The agency is demanding that employees pay \$6,000 per year for health care instead of the current \$552 per year—an increase of 11 times for the exact same benefits for workers and their families. This attack is in line with Obama's misnamed Affordable Care Act (ACA)—or Obamacare—which has been used to reduce benefits while shifting costs from employers onto the backs of working people.

The demand to roll back health care benefits has been a key issue in strikes by Verizon Communications workers, steel workers, the Minnesota nurses struggle and others. The ACA includes a Cadillac Tax provision that imposes a 40 percent excise tax on employers who provide supposedly overgenerous benefits. Although Congress agreed to delay its implementation until January 2020, big employers have shifted costs to stay below the tax threshold. For the first time, more than half of US workers have a deductible of more than \$1,000 for a plan covering a single person.

The Philadelphia transit workers are demanding better pension benefits. They presently have a \$50,000 cap, which means when transit workers' pay reaches

this amount SEPTA will not contribute anything more to their retirement, no matter how many more hours they work.

The pension obligation has been calculated as \$1.2 billion, meaning it is 62 percent funded. The union negotiators have stated the money is there, and point out that the managers suffer no cap on their pensions. Pension cutbacks are another key issue affecting workers throughout the country. This was a key issue that provoked the New York City transit strike in December 2005.

Another key issue involves the schedules that force employees to work onerous midnight shifts, as well as not having enough time for proper rest or even to use the bathroom.

Despite the fact that the walkout is legal, the transit agency issued a statement stating, "If we foresee an agreement will not come to pass, SEPTA intends to seek to enjoin the strike for November 8 to ensure that the strike does not prevent any voters from getting to the polls and exercising their right to vote." SEPTA is planning to obtain the injunction from the US District Court. The state of Pennsylvania, unlike some other states, does not have an early voting procedure and so nearly all ballots must be cast on Election Day.

Democratic Party Congressman Bob Brady has complained that if the strike continues on November 8, "It's going to hurt. It'll hurt."

While concerned how the strike might affect the electoral prospects of the Democrats, these same politicians have nothing but contempt for the rights of workers who have labored for years under austerity measures imposed by the Democratic-controlled city administration.

In early October, the members of Transport Workers Union Local 234 voted to strike, if no settlement was

reached, by November 1 and not to go to work without a new contract. They did this knowing the walkout could easily go on to Election Day.

Indeed, the workers have a long history of militancy, having walked out nine times previously in the last 50 years. In 1998, the strike lasted for 40 days.

The militancy of the transit workers underscores the fact that workers know the outcome of the elections—regardless of whether Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump wins—will lead to no improvement for working people.

During a press conference, the TWU local president Willie Brown, who is leading the negotiations, made a craven apology for the strike. “I’m sorry,” he said, “It’s the only tool we have available to us.” He further explained he would feel “comfortable” with binding arbitration.

Binding arbitration has long been used as a weapon against workers because it removes the right to strike and leaves the fate of workers in the hands of a less than neutral arbitrator. This protocol exists in New York state law, which fines both the workers and the union for walkouts and provides for mandatory arbitration in the case of a declared impasse in the negotiations.

Philadelphia’s sister union, TWU Local 100 in New York City, has used the threat of binding arbitration to try to force its membership into voting for an inferior concessions-laden deal.

This struggle cannot be taken forward through the trade unions. TWU Local 234 as well as the national union have endorsed Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton, the preferred candidate of Wall Street and the military.

The city of Philadelphia, with a population of 1.5 million, is the fifth largest in the US. Like cities throughout the country, it is a center of explosive social tensions, fueled by economic inequity, rising rents and gentrification and decades of austerity and attacks on workers. While federal, state and local officials squander trillions on war, corporate tax cuts and debt servicing to criminal financial institutions, they claim there is no money for decent wages, pensions and health care benefits for workers.

To win this struggle transit workers must fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class throughout the city. Transit workers should elect rank-and-file

strike committees, independent of the TWU and other unions. In opposition to efforts to pit workers against passengers, transit workers must spearhead the fight to unite all working people against the profit system and the two big-business parties.



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