

Strike pits Philadelphia transit workers against budget-cutting Democrats

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The strike by more than 4,700 transit workers in Philadelphia against the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), which began November 1, is a powerful manifestation of the militancy of workers on the eve of the presidential elections. The walkout that has paralyzed mass transportation in the nation's fifth largest city has thrust workers into a direct confrontation with the Democratic Party, which has overseen public service cuts and attacks on workers at the local, state and federal level.

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) was forced to call the strike after rank-and-file overwhelmingly opposed SEPTA's demands for a massive increase in out-of-pocket health care costs and wage and pension concessions. Workers also made it clear that they would not accept an extension of the contract and would strike without an agreement.

Talks continued Wednesday night according to local news reports. SEPTA spokesman Andrew Busch said "steady progress" had been made while TWU Local 234 spokesman Jamie Horwitz said progress was being made "inch by inch."

SEPTA executives want employees to contribute 11 times more than what they currently do for health care coverage. This is in line with the policies of the Obama administration whose central domestic policy—the Affordable Care Act—has been used to shift health care costs from the employers to workers themselves.

With the collusion of the unions, government and private employers throughout the US have been able to keep wage increases limited to 3.1 percent in 2016, according to the Society of Human Resource Management, after nine years that saw a fall in real wages of -1.0 percent. The meager pay increase this year, however, has been more than eaten up by 3.4 percent higher premiums and a staggering 12 percent

hike in deductibles, according to a survey of 2,000 US businesses by Kaiser Family Foundation.

Transit workers are also opposed to SEPTA's freeze on pension contributions on any annual earnings above \$50,000. This currently translates into retirement income of only \$30,000 a year, which will leave a pensioner and his family near if not in poverty in a major metropolitan area like Philadelphia. Transit managers have no such cap.

Another major issue involves scheduling and driver fatigue. Currently, vehicle operators are only allowed five minutes between runs, a right, limited as it is, which is not always honored. The union demand to extend this to 10 minutes is in itself hardly sufficient to give operators necessary break and bathroom time for their health and safety, as well as the safety of the passengers. Another demand by workers involves the need for 14 hours between shifts instead of the current nine hours.

Expressing a desire to expand the struggle, striking transit workers on Tuesday afternoon picketed SEPTA's regional rail lines, which are still running despite the walkout, and created a slowdown of that system. As a result, by 5:45pm, SEPTA obtained an injunction in the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas that prevents picketers from interfering with the Regional Rail lines.

SEPTA is also threatening to obtain an injunction if the strike lasts until Election Day, November 8. This would also involve the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas, and the court would have to find that the walkout is placing the safety or welfare of the public at risk and the striking workers would be ordered to go back to work on that day. If this did happen, it could be used to establish a precedent for making any strike at anytime and anywhere illegal.

While the Democrats are concerned the strike might undermine their electoral chances in the critical city of Philadelphia, the fact is they are more than willing to utilize any anti-democratic method to crush the strike and prevent it from sparking a broader movement of the working class throughout the city and region. Current Mayor Jim Kenney and his predecessor, Michael Nutter, are the tools of the banking, real estate and other corporate interests that dominate the city and want to deliver a punishing blow to transit workers.

Pennsylvania's Democratic governor, Thomas Wolf, denounced the strike, saying, "This is something that is bad for everybody and has to end." Democratic Party officials are working over time with TWU officials to come up with a deal to end the walkout.

The fact that transit workers have struck in defiance of the official complaints about disrupting Election Day underscores the fact that millions of workers know that there will be no improvements whether Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump is in the White House.

While the big-business political parties can find limitless resources for the banks and the military machine, they constantly assert there is no money for safe transportation, decent housing, health benefits and wages. The city has shut down scores of public schools and a year ago hundreds of students walked out of classes to protest state budget cuts and attacks on teachers. With entire neighborhoods being gentrified, the Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA), which provides for low-income housing, just laid off 126 employees—or 14 percent of its workforce—due to cutbacks in federal funding.

The trade unions, including the national Transport Workers Union, have offered meaningless gestures of support to striking workers. The last thing the unions want is the strike to become a catalyst for a far broader mobilization against the Democratic Party, which the unions rely on to secure their financial interests. TWU Local 234 President Willie Brown and the national TWU leadership are staunch supporters of Clinton, a warmonger and corrupt tool of Wall Street.

If the strike is not to be strangled and defeated by the TWU and AFL-CIO, rank-and-file workers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. They face powerful enemies but far more powerful potential allies—the working class throughout Philadelphia, a city of 1.5 million. Rank-and-file strike committees should

be elected to broaden the struggle, including the holding of mass demonstrations, rallies and joint strike action to oppose the austerity program of the Democrats and their anti-working class agenda.



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