

Injunction threat in Philadelphia transit strike

A WSWWS reporting team
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On the fourth day of the powerful strike by more than 4,700 Philadelphia transit workers the media and big business politicians are stepping up their threats, claiming the walkout will disrupt the November 8 presidential election. Meanwhile, the Transport Workers Union indicates that it may be close to accepting a sellout deal that will trade increases in health insurance premiums for a small wage increase.

Despite the fact that the strike is legal, The Southeastern Pennsylvania transportation Authority (SEPTA) is threatening to file an injunction that would force strikers to return to work on Election Day, November 8. “We’re still putting it together,” said Fran Kelly, Septa’s assistant deputy manager for governmental affairs.

The injunction, if filed in the Philadelphia Common Pleas Court, would assert that the strike would place undue and unsafe hardship for many people who rely on mass transit to vote. This, despite the fact that many polling places are within walking distance.

Congressman Robert Brady, considered to be the Democratic Party’s main spokesman in Philadelphia, has said that Clinton would need 460,000 votes in that city to offset what has been estimated to be a Republican advantage in the rest of the state. Pennsylvania is considered to be a battleground state in the presidential election and is critical to the Clinton campaign.

According to leaked reports on the negotiations, SEPTA and Transport Workers Union local 234 are trying to work out a deal in which the union would accept concessions on health benefits for an insignificant improvement in pensions and a wage deal that would fall below the rate of inflation.

Right now, no matter how much overtime a worker puts in for a year, only \$50,000 counts toward pensions, which provide a maximum payout of \$30,000 per year. The employee contributes 3.5 percent of his wage check for the pension benefits. Management has no cap on its pension plan.

According to the leaks, SEPTA would increase the cap by a mere eight percent over the course of a five-year contract, which will be more than eaten up by the rise in cost of living. The wage hike offer of \$8,100 over the next five years would amount, according to workers contacted by the World Socialist Web Site, a mere one percent per year, a wage cut when inflation is taken into account.

In addition, SEPTA wants workers to contribute \$164 a month toward the cost of their health benefits, about four times as much as they now pay, further negating whatever wage increase they receive.

In attempting to sell such a deal the TWU leadership confronts a restive and rebellious rank-and-file. Workers made the decision to strike in defiance of the often repeated warning by the media and local Democratic politicians that the walkout would interfere with Democrat Hillary Clinton’s chances of winning the presidential elections.

The strike is an implicit recognition by transit workers that neither Clinton nor Republican Donald Trump offers a solution for working people. Quite the contrary, workers expressed to the WSWWS the feeling that both the Republican and Democratic parties are instruments of the wealthy corporations. They pointed out that while SEPTA claims that it has limited funds when it comes to the wages and benefits of workers, there is always plenty of money for the banks, corporations and the war drives of the US government. The strikers also expressed a strong desire to unite their struggles with all other workers.

Outside the Alleghany Avenue bus depot, Tyra Smith, a bus operator for 14 years, said, “Why should health care be an issue continuously? This is a physically demanding job. There are companies that pay 100 percent of the cost. Our work is mentally, physically and emotionally demanding. We need dental and eye care. We are on a bus most of the day. People put their issues on us. We are exposed to their diseases.”

Another bus driver with 29 years’ experience, Andre Bryant, added, “We do not get sick days. Management gets 100 percent when they call out.” Tyra continued, “For workers in general, they are taking back something that we had. I took the job for the benefits. I keep coming back to work for the health care. They want part-time workers here and we won’t have any health care.”

“This is not rule by the people. It is rule the people,” declared Tyra. “The government can be slippery. The only change that will happen is from the number of people. The people who can’t get to work should be marching on City Hall. We need one union that unites all workers. What happened with the union leaders is that once a person gets a taste of the high income, they act like the top. But for us, the cost of living and

utilities are going up.

“They offered us a 5 percent pay increase for five years and want to take back two of our paid holidays. Gentrification is taking away the neighborhoods that people have. It is the wealthy versus the not wealthy, they are taking what they want by any means necessary. I agree that we need a better system.”

A bus driver for four years, Michael Guerriero, responded, “People are scared but, to be honest with you, the business aspect has always been against the workers. The billionaires are arrogant and disrespectful. They are brought up to not understand the problem. It boils down to the numbers and the money. It is time to go back to the old days, like Spartacus. We are making a stand for the people who come after us.

“I have to get up four in the morning to leave at 6:30 to get to work by 7:30. Then I work until 7:30 p.m. I am occupied 14 to 15 hours per day in the job, without breaks. Somebody recorded that bus driving is one of the most stressful jobs. A rider complained about the bus being late by the schedule. A million things can happen to make a bus late: a flat tire, a bus breakdown, it’s crowded, someone passed out, threw up, a fight on the bus, a trash truck, an ambulance.”

Another bus operator, Hondu Brown, with 29 years’ experience, spoke about working conditions, “It’s unfair for our pension to be capped and management’s pension not to be capped. We are the backbone of the company because we are the ones who do the labor. If I work six or seven days a week and make about \$70,000 for one year, not one dime of that over \$30,000 goes to what we collect in our pension per year. We end up with an income that put us a little bit above poverty.”

On working conditions, Brown said, “We only get 15 minutes for lunch, and it is very possible to work a whole day without getting one. Very often, we only get two minutes between runs. The schedule makes you unsafe for you are running on their time, which interferes with bathroom breaks.

“SEPTA always wants part-timers that they don’t have to pay as much. They wouldn’t have to pay them any benefits.

“Right now we pay 1 percent of our paycheck into the health benefits. When they agreed a number of years ago to have us contribute into our health benefits, it opened the door for greater demands on us.”

A bus operator, Vincent Morgan, with one year experience said, “I have two sons, four and five years old, with asthma, with medical expenses and babysitting costs. I have no medical coverage while on strike.

“When I get to the end of the line, I get no rest time. I am operating a bus while I am tired. We are demanding better schedules. Fatigue is the most important issue because all of the drivers are working while tired.”

A worker in rapid transit spoke on his view of the political issues. “The politicians make promises that they know they won’t keep. There is no difference between the Democrats and the Republicans. They both worship the money of the rich.

“The unions are for Hillary Clinton and she is for Wall Street.

The Democrats and the Republicans are two groups fighting to be in charge. We are the pawns in their game.

“The mayor and the governor want to get us back to work. All the politicians want to get us back to work. I understand that the federal government will come here to end the strike.

“They are using the issue of Election Day against us. SEPTA and the politicians are threatening an injunction against the strike on Election Day to get us back to work. In reality, most of the polling places are in walking distance. It is frustrating not knowing what is happening with the closed negotiations.”

Near the Fern Rock Transportation Center at North 11th Street and Nedron Street, the WSWS spoke to workers on the SEPTA trains.

Asked how he felt about the wars, one worker said “I was military, army. The US goes to war to get something they can get for itself. The US says they are fighting a war against terrorism when they are the terrorists.”

Asked if he thought other military and ex-military thought the US was creating terrorism, he called over a buddy who had been in the marines. He responded in total agreement: “We trained Osama bin Laden and all the others. They are spending for the wars and spending our blood. Why are they minding other countries’ business when we need to build our infrastructure and invest to build here? We need to educate children.

At the same location, train operator Mark with more than 20 years experience quickly raised the political issues when he said, “If we thought Hillary Clinton would have solved our problems, we would not have gone out on strike in the first place. She is an instrument of Wall Street. Our votes do not even matter. They should just let Congress vote and pick the president. They all play political games with the lives of working people and the working poor.”



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