

Transit officials, Democrats seek injunction to break Philadelphia transit strike

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7 November 2016

As the powerful walkout by nearly 5,000 transit workers completes its first week, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) and Democrats on the local and state level are seeking to use the courts to end the strike.

The City of Philadelphia filed a motion in state court Sunday to stop the walkout, claiming that if it continued until Election Day on Tuesday it would jeopardize the right of citizens to vote. Pennsylvania's Democratic governor, Tom Wolf, said he not only supported the injunction to end the strike altogether, but also would issue an amicus brief in support of the injunction. A hearing on the motion is taking place this morning at the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas.

The governor, who was elected two years ago with the full backing of the unions, condemned the striking workers, saying, "This strike has been devastating for so many individuals and their families and has created extreme hardships for the city and for businesses. The time for it to end is now."

City Solicitor Sozi Pedro Tulante, as part of a Democratic Party-run city hall, said, "The city has a legal responsibility to ensure that Philadelphians can exercise their constitutional right to vote."

All of these are specious and self-serving arguments. The Democratic political establishment is seeking to strip transit workers of the right to strike and is trying to conceal this behind supposed concerns of the rights of voters, the elderly, school children, etc.

In reality, the Democratic Party, which has long dominated political power in the city, has spearheaded the attack on public services, closing scores of schools, slashing funding to public housing, and attacking the jobs, wages and health and pension benefits of municipal workers. The sole concern of the Democrats is that the transit strike could become the catalyst for a

broader movement of the working class against the Democrats and the financial and corporate interests behind these attacks.

Claims about "disrupting" the elections are largely manufactured in any case. Polling places are located in local neighborhoods, in walking distance from their homes, and the strike would have little effect on the outcome. The Clinton campaign is reportedly organizing Uber and Lyft rides to the polls in the city, fearing that any lessening of its vote could tip the pivotal state of Pennsylvania against her. For workers, however, a Clinton presidency would only see the escalation of the assault on public sector workers that has been carried out by the Obama administration.

If the court injunction succeeds against this legal strike, it will establish a precedent against any job actions anywhere and at any time in the country. It can always be claimed that walking off the job will cause "hardships" and the courts will be empowered to illegalize any strike. Of course, no such court action is carried out against those who order devastating budget cuts that cause far greater public hardships.

On Friday, Judge Linda Carpenter of the Court of Common Pleas ruled that SEPTA was unable to prove in a motion, using a clause in the Public Employee Relations Act, that the walkout endangers the "health, safety and welfare" of the residents of Philadelphia.

While it is not clear what the outcome of Monday's ruling will be, so far state and city officials have decided to postpone a direct legal confrontation with the strikers, fearing that it would only incite workers who might also defy a judge's decision, and have instead relied on the Transport Workers Union and the other municipal unions to isolate the strike and try to wear down the resistance of workers.

TWU Local 234 President Willie Brown has postured

as a steadfast opponent of management, denouncing SEPTA for relying on the courts to end the strike rather than negotiate. He has complained that the transit authority contributes millions of dollars more to the management pension fund than it does to the pension fund for the workers. Last year, the transit authority “gave each management retiree a \$5,000 annual increase in their pension checks. Managers have both a defined benefit pension and a generous match to a 401K plan.”

These statements are little more than hot air, however; the TWU on the local and national level has the closest ties to the Democrats, who have overseen the attacks on transit workers and are now ganging up to break the strike. The Philadelphia local and the nationwide TWU are supporting Hillary Clinton, who is a very well paid agent of Wall Street and just as ruthless an enemy of the working class as Donald Trump.

According to various press leaks, SEPTA is seeking a sharp increase in health care contributions from workers—now estimated to be four times the current level—and wage increases below the rate of inflation. This is directly in line with the Obama administration’s Affordable Care Act (ACA) and the so-called Cadillac Tax, which has been used by employers to shift the cost of health care onto the backs of workers and force them into inferior plans.

Another major issue is pensions. Right now, a worker can receive a maximum of only \$30,000 per year in pension benefits in a metropolitan area with one of the highest costs of living in America. The strikers are fighting to remove this onerous cap because they know, as the rate of inflation increases, this limit will force them, after having done backbreaking work for years without proper rest or even time for bathroom breaks, to live in poverty.

All the other issues, such as inadequate wage hikes, are bound up with this since wages are the means by which the pension payout is determined. It has been calculated that Philadelphia already has a poverty rate of more than 25 percent.

While federal, state and local officials shovel out trillions for war, bank bailouts, corporate tax cuts and other giveaways to the super-rich, they are insisting that there is no money to provide a comfortable retirement to public sector workers. “We have to stay within our

budget,” said SEPTA’s assistant manager for government and public affairs Francis Kelly. She also said, “There’s no extra money here. There’s no money coming from the state or the city.”

The strike has thrust transit workers into a direct confrontation with the Democrats and their servants in the TWU and other unions. If this struggle is to be taken forward, workers should elect rank-and-file strike committees to fight to broaden the support for the struggle among teachers, firefighters and other public and private sector workers facing the same attacks on health care and pensions, and among students in the city fighting budget cuts. This should include mass demonstrations, rallies and joint strike action to defend the Philadelphia transit workers.



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