To boost Clinton, unions shut down Philadelphia transit strike

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Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 234 shut down the six-day strike of nearly 5,000 Philadelphia transit workers Monday morning ordering strikers back to the job without any opportunity to vote or even see the details of the announced five-year package. The sabotage of the strike, which shut down the sixth largest transit system in the US, was aimed at bolstering the get-out-the-vote campaign for Hillary Clinton who faces a tight race today in the pivotal state of Pennsylvania.

Nothing could more clearly demonstrate the anti-working class alliance between the trade unions and the Democratic Party, which from Obama down to the municipal level has directed the attack on transit workers, teachers and other public sector workers' jobs, living standards and health and pension benefits.

The state's Democratic governor, Tom Wolf, denounced the strike and backed a motion filed by the Democratic-controlled city government to break the strike on the grounds that it was denying citizens of the right to vote. In the end, however, officials relied on the union to smash the strike making Monday morning's scheduled hearing on an injunction a moot point.

With trains, buses and trollies running again, Clinton held her final campaign rally at Independence Hall in Philadelphia Monday evening, along with former President Bill Clinton, Barack and Michelle Obama.

Given the refusal to release any details it is possible that the TWU ended the strike without actually having a contract agreement in hand. The Communications Workers of America (CWA) shut down the 45-day strike by 40,000 Verizon telecom workers last spring claiming it had reached an agreement. Five months after the end of the strike Verizon workers have still not seen a formal contract.

The action of the TWU confirms the warning of the *World Socialist Web Site*, which wrote, "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."

"We're going to support Hillary Clinton," TWU Local 234 President Willie Brown said before falsely claiming the election "didn't really play a factor with me."

Last week strikers told reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* that they were prepared to a judge's order. This would have provoked a direct confrontation with the Democratic Party on Election Day and further exposed that it is a party of the banks and big corporations, no less than the Republicans. Under Obama, the AFL-CIO and Change to Win labor federations have limited strikes to the lowest level since the end of the Second World War. This allowed the Democratic president to restructure class relations after the 2008 financial crash based on slashing wages and shifting health care and pension costs onto workers.

The major issue in the Philadelphia strike was the efforts of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA)—a body that includes Democrats, such as US Congressman Bob Brady and State Representative Dwight Evans—to sharply increase out-of-pocket health care costs for workers. A leak Sunday night said SEPTA wanted to increase worker contribution four-fold. Workers were also opposed to the insulting wage offer and SEPTA's determination to maintain a $30,000 cap on pensions, which means poverty for retirees in one of the most expensive metropolitan areas in the country.

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SEPTA, the Democratic Party politicians and the unions conspired to shut the strike before it became a catalyst for a far broader movement of the working class against austerity by the Democrats and Republicans, who have limitless resources for bank bailouts, corporate tax cuts and war. The transit agency has insisted there is no money to address workers' demands.

SEPTA'S chairman since 1999—real estate mogul Pasquale T. Deon Sr.—has boasted that he has continually kept the agency's budget balanced. This has been accomplished on the backs of the transit workers by writing schedules that maximize productivity by minimizing breaks, and by various concessions on wages, health benefits, and pensions; and the riders through fare hikes about every three years in a city with a poverty rate of more than 25 percent.

The local union's executive board will vote on the settlement before rank-and-file workers in a process that could take weeks. The transit agency's board of directors also has to vote on it.

The attack on public sector workers will only be escalated whether Clinton or Trump wins. Philadelphia workers and all workers should draw the lessons from the betrayal of the strike. The unions are not working class organizations; they are organizations of upper-middle-class bureaucrats that are tied to the Democratic Party and big business. The fight to defend the working class requires the building of new organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by the rank-and-file and based on the methods of the class struggle. This must be combined with the development of a political counter-offensive by the working class and the fight for a socialist program, including the seizing of the ill-gotten gains of the financial aristocracy and the pouring of trillions of dollars into public services.

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