

Philadelphia transit workers must reject sellout deal

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After the Transport Workers Union (TWU) shut down their powerful six-day strike—in a failed effort to boost the vote for Hillary Clinton on Election Day—nearly 5,000 Philadelphia transit workers will be voting Friday on a sellout proposal brought back by the TWU local and international leadership.

Instead of releasing the full contract itself, the TWU Local 234 has only published a “highlights” brochure to paint the deal in as rosy a manner as possible. Nevertheless, certain details of the agreement with the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) are clear.

- The miserable wage hikes of 10.5 percent over five years—after years of stagnating and falling living standards—can easily turn into a de facto cut in real wages depending on the rate of inflation.

- Any minor increase in wages, moreover, will be more than chewed up by increased contributions of workers for health benefits. Costs will increase incrementally from 1 percent to 2.5 percent by December 2019. For the average worker this translates to a rise in monthly contributions from \$46 a month to \$115. In addition, there will be an increase in copays for doctor or hospital visits, as well as increased copays for prescription medications. This more than two-and-a-half times increase in health care contributions is in line with the nonstop rise of health care costs, such as in Obamacare, for working people throughout the country.

- Ignoring one of the central demands of workers, the TWU-backed deal provides no relief from the onerous work schedules, which endanger workers and the riding public. It does not provide for proper rest and

recuperation time from operating vehicles, including even proper bathroom time.

- The pension calculations are being replaced with a new formula. Instead of the current system of calculating these benefits on how much an employee makes in his last years on the job, it would now be based on how long an employee worked for the transit agency. At best this will increase the current cap of \$30,000 to \$36,000, which would still leave retired workers, living in one of the most expensive cities in America, in or near poverty.

Workers continue to be saddled with intolerable working conditions, skyrocketing health costs, inadequate wages and poverty level pensions. This is not because of any lack of militancy and determination by Philadelphia transit workers who have conducted 11 strikes in SEPTA’s 50-year history, the most of any transit agency in the country. The cause of this situation lies in the betrayals of the TWU and other unions, which are allied with the Democratic Party and defend the capitalist profit system, which enriches the few at the expense of the working class.

The TWU shut down the strike on the morning of November 7, just in time to get the transportation system running so that there would be no disruption for presidential candidate Hillary Clinton on Election Day, November 8. The union did this, with the strikers not only not having a chance to vote on the deal before ending the walkout, but not even knowing what was in it. Local and state Democrats, including Governor Tom Wolf, denounced transit workers and threatened to seek an injunction to break the strike.

Despite the best efforts of the unions—which handed over \$150 million to Clinton and the Democrats—the

Democratic Party lost the pivotal state of Pennsylvania and was shattered in the presidential elections. This was largely due to the fact that millions of workers and younger people who had voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012 abandoned the Democratic Party—either by not voting or by voting for Trump—because they identified Clinton with the powerful corporate and political interests that have waged an unrelenting war against the working class. The billionaire real estate tycoon and fascist candidate, Donald Trump, was able to exploit social anger and political disaffection and win the election.

After the election, the national AFL-CIO leadership has quickly stated its willingness to work with Trump who will lead the most right-wing and anti-working class government in the history of the United States. TWU national President Harry Lombardo responded to the election by stating, “We must remain united in our fight to hold the new administration and Congress accountable to the issues that truly matter: protecting organizing and collective bargaining rights. Investing in Amtrak and public transit. Fixing corporate bankruptcy laws to safeguard worker pensions. And rebuilding an economy that works for all us, not just wealthy CEOs.”

What a fraud! Trump is not going to do any of those things. On the contrary, he is committed to huge tax cuts for the rich and wealthy corporations, which can only be paid for at the expense of the wages and the health and pension benefits of workers. What Lombardo, as other AFL-CIO leaders are really saying, is that they are willing to collaborate with the Republican president, just as they did with Obama, to impose anti-worker policies, including the destruction of health care and pensions, as long as they have a “seat at the table.”

While the union bureaucrats are lining up to serve Trump and Obama, Bernie Sanders and other Democrats are pledging to “ease” the transition to a Trump presidency. Thousands of young people are marching around the country to oppose Trump, who did not even win the popular vote. Opposition to Trump and his far-right policies will only grow in the coming weeks and months.

The rejection of this sellout contract and the resumption of the struggle by Philadelphia transit workers would be a powerful statement making clear that the working class will not accept more sacrifices to

finance corporate tax cuts and war. To take this struggle forward, transit workers should elect rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of this battle out of the hands of the TWU. These committees should fight to unite with every other section of workers and young people—students fighting school closures and budget cuts, all those opposed to Trump and his fascist policies—in a common industrial and political fight.

The way forward is not to revive the rotten corpse of the Democratic Party, which is just as much a tool of big business as the Republicans, but to build a politically independent party of the working class that will fight for a socialist alternative to the capitalist system. If the wealth created by working people is to be used for the common good—for the expansion of public transportation, health care, pensions and good wages—instead of for war and the ever-greater enrichment of billionaires and millionaires, then the working class must take political power in our own hands.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will provide every assistance possible to workers in this battle. We urge Philadelphia transit workers to contact our web site today.



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