

Philadelphia transit workers vote to strike by the end of the month

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On Sunday, workers representing over 5,000 Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) drivers and other personnel voted unanimously to strike if they do not receive an acceptable contract by the end of the month. The strike approval comes as the contract between the transit authority and workers represented by Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 234 is set to expire on October 31.

Workers in southeastern Pennsylvania, which encompasses the Philadelphia metropolitan area, are demanding wage increases, better maternity leave policies and hazard pay as well as compensation to families of transit personnel who have died due to complications from COVID-19. According to TWU Local 234, 11 SEPTA employees have passed away from COVID while the transit authority has stood idly by, paying nothing to the impacted families.

SEPTA workers are in a powerful position both economically and politically. A strike by Philadelphia transit workers would effectively paralyze a central economic artery on the United States East Coast, bringing business and travel to a halt in the weeks before the holiday season.

The SEPTA strike vote comes amid a strike wave among the international working class. In striking, the 5,000 transit workers in Philadelphia would join over 10,000 John Deere agricultural machinery rworkers in the Midwest. They also join a growing international movement of the working class that includes striking transit workers in Sydney, Australia. According to Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, a wave of labor unrest is spreading "from one group to another. Strikes are contagious."

Regionally, the SEPTA vote takes place less than a week after 350 Piedmont Airlines flight attendants at the Philadelphia International Airport voted to strike over wages after their contract negotiations stalled, having

dragged out over three years. They would join several hundred Kellogg's workers in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, part of a strike by 1,400 workers nationwide against the breakfast food corporation.

In auto, Dana Corp. workers in nearby Pottstown are among 3,500 Dana auto parts workers around the country who have voted overwhelmingly to strike but have been working on an extended contract. The United Auto Workers and United Steelworkers unions have kept the Dana workers on the job since August. This is despite Dana workers having rejected the first tentative agreement in early September by over 90 percent.

The Philadelphia *Inquirer* reported that SEPTA is only at 47 percent of its pre-pandemic ridership level and continues to lose \$1 million a day as it operates. The system received a CARES Act payment of between \$1.5 and \$2 billion, which it is hoping can sustain it until 2023. "[W]e don't know when ridership is going to come back; it's hard to make projections for the longer term," SEPTA spokesperson Andrew Busch told the publication.

The transit authority is giving workers two insulting offers as an alternative: either accept a two-year contract that would include a small wage increase and a one-time "pandemic payment," or take a four-year agreement that promises no pay increase and anchors all future gains to SEPTA's "ability to pay." The TWU has protested SEPTA's crying broke, noting that the transit system had previously planned to spend \$40 million of its bailout money to build out its rail line in the near future.

Last week, SEPTA General Manager Leslie Richards added insult to workers' injury in the local press. The transit official praised the system's supposed "once in a generation" chance for upgrades due to the CARES Act package it received. Richards falsely claimed that "there has not been one single case, not here at SEPTA, not here in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, not in this country and not in any country since COVID began, where transit

has been shown to be a spreader of COVID-19.”

SEPTA workers have gone on strike a dozen times since 1975. In 2016, transit workers went on a six-day strike as SEPTA refused to lift a pension cap on its workers making over \$50,000 yearly. The strike was aborted after the TWU colluded with the state’s Democratic governor, Tom Wolf, to bring the job action to a halt so as not to interfere with the 2016 presidential elections.

News of the potential strike sent ripples of panic through the region’s business community and political establishment. Philadelphia School District Superintendent Michael Hite, Jr. expressed fears that a transit strike “would have a devastating impact on the operation of our School District and our ability to sustain in-person learning five days a week.” Hite added that this supposed doomsday scenario would jeopardize “something we all worked extremely hard to make happen for all students this school year.”

Hite, who earlier this year relied on the complicity of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers to force an unsafe reopening of the city’s 200,000-student school system, cynically declared: “In the midst of increasing gun violence and the many other traumas impacting our communities as the COVID-19 pandemic continues, our schools are a safe haven for thousands of Philadelphia’s young people.” Nearly 60,000 of the district’s 200,000 students rely on public transit, along with thousands of its employees.

A teacher in the Philadelphia school system contradicted these lies in comments to the *World Socialist Web Site*. The educator said that his school was “in virtual [learning] today because of [an] outbreak in our school. Of course, we have not been told anything specific at all.” The teacher relayed that nearly his entire classroom of students was in quarantine.

In Philadelphia, the unsafe reopening of schools and the economy has been overseen by the Democratic Party. Last week, TWU Local 234 published a newsletter declaring that “from what we’re seeing at the bargaining table it would be easy to conclude that there is no difference between the two parties.” The TWU threatened a “very rude response” to the “politicians” in both parties.

Despite the empty rhetoric, the TWU has put forward no policy that would upset its Democratic allies. In the 2020 presidential election cycle, the TWU donated over \$909,000 to the Democratic Party, or 93 percent of the union’s total campaign contributions, according to OpenSecrets.org.

Similarly, despite the strike authorization vote, the

Inquirer notes: “A strike is not inevitable. If an agreement is close as the contract expires, union leaders could decide to keep members on the job without a contract or make an agreement with SEPTA on an extension of the current deal. Negotiations would continue.”

Further undermining the TWU 234’s adversarial posturing were public comments by SEPTA spokespeople on Sunday. “SEPTA and representatives from TWU Local 234 have been engaging in a productive dialogue at the bargaining table,” said Andrew Busch. The SEPTA representative added, “we are hopeful that an agreement can be reached without any service disruptions for riders.”

Under these circumstances, SEPTA workers must be on guard against treachery by the TWU. In any locality where it operates, the TWU has worked with management to impose the impact of the pandemic on its members. In New York City, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority has relied on the TWU, even incorporating it into various union-management committees designed to maximize productivity. This has been crucial during the pandemic, as employers face labor shortages due to the risks associated with COVID-19.

In terms of maternity leave, the TWU Local 100 leaders in New York even collaborated with the MTA to sabotage workers’ lawsuits alleging that the transit authority’s abusive treatment caused a worker to go into labor on the job, resulting in a stillbirth.

SEPTA workers must form rank-and-file committees among themselves, independent of the TWU. These committees will help connect the struggles of SEPTA workers to the struggles of thousands of other workers coming into struggle, forming the spearhead of a counteroffensive against the attempts by big business and their political representatives to push the economic and social disaster created by the mismanagement of the pandemic onto the shoulders of workers.



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