

Philadelphia transit union calls off strike, announces deal with cuts to real wages

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29 October 2021

On Friday morning, Philadelphia's Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) and Transport Workers Union Local 234 announced a tentative agreement (TA), less than three days before a November 1 strike deadline. The deadline was set last week, when workers in the fifth-largest public transit system in the United States voted unanimously to go on strike November 1 if their contract expired without an adequate deal on the table.

News headlines in the local Philadelphia press flashed "strike averted" as union officials praised their tentative agreement. While the full contents of the bargain have not been presented to members or the public, the various "highlights," as well as commentary from various officials, reveal that the current offer is the product of a TWU climb-down in order to come to an agreement as quickly as possible with SEPTA.

Noticeably missing from the TA is the TWU's demand for SEPTA to make payments to workers' families when they pass away from COVID-19. Previously, TWU Local 234 president Willie Brown had declared this demand "a human rights issue" that was "more important than just raises." Eleven workers in the transit system have died and the workforce has been deemed "essential," meaning they have been forced to work throughout the entire ordeal.

"It's something we're going to keep working on," stated Brown, indicating that the current TA is not even finished but was announced simply to head off a strike. "I am very pleased that we were able to come to terms without a strike," declared the TWU 234 president at a press conference.

The proposed contract would last until 2023 and consists of two meager 3 percent yearly wage increases. This is effectively a sizeable cut to real wages, as current US inflation is higher than 5 percent. In

addition, the TA gives workers a one-time pandemic bonus based upon the number of hours they worked between March 15, 2020 and March 15, 2021. This payment would top out at \$2,200 per worker.

A maternity leave benefit system has been introduced in the offer, allowing for men and women to take up to two weeks of paid time off for a childbirth. Previously, SEPTA required employees to use up all of their sick leave before applying for maternity leave, creating an obstacle course for working families. The TA also gives workers holiday pay for Juneteenth, a new federally-designated holiday.

"The shorter deal makes a lot of sense because we can look about two years ahead with the federal COVID relief funding that we have," stated SEPTA spokesperson Andrew Busch of the significance of the shorter time period. "After about two years, that expires." In other words, once the federal stimulus wears off, SEPTA will demand even further cuts.

As with public transit systems across the country, SEPTA has faced financial shortages during the pandemic, partially offset by nearly \$2 billion in CARES Act funding last year. While SEPTA claims that its loss of ridership, which is at 47 percent of pre-pandemic levels, has caused it to burn nearly \$1.5 million in operation costs daily, the authority has still aggressively pursued capital investments. Last week, SEPTA general manager Leslie Richards appeared before a local chamber of commerce to tout the "once in a generation" opportunity the transit system had to expand its rail service into nearby suburbs.

SEPTA workers should vote "no" on the present offer, which has not even been revealed to the membership, and which was worked out behind their backs to prevent a strike and keep workers on the job, where many will continue to become infected with

COVID-19.

The sudden announcement of the deal shows that the TWU is on the side of management, not workers. To carry their struggle forward, workers must follow the examples of autoworkers at Volvo Trucks and Dana, who formed independent rank-and-file committees to mobilize opposition to their unions' betrayals and to appeal for support within the working class, which is entering into a massive strike wave throughout the state, nation and world.

As the TWU and SEPTA officials were meeting in Philadelphia's Old City district to conclude their sordid agreement, employees in the Old City's Wyndham hotel voted unanimously to strike, citing issues with pay. Their contract expired in 2019.

This follows a strike ratification vote taken by 350 Piedmont Airlines flight attendants at the Philadelphia International Airport. In nearby Lancaster, Pennsylvania, several hundred Kellogg's workers remain on strike, and in the Midwest, 10,500 John Deere workers have been on strike for two weeks.

In Philadelphia's public schools, the SEPTA workforce is connected to the fates of more than 60,000 students and teachers that require public transit to commute to class. They have been forced by the city administration and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers union back into unsafe school buildings where decades of underfunding have left teachers and students especially vulnerable to the spread of COVID-19.

On Thursday, Philadelphia's public school superintendent William Hite, Jr. announced that students would be made to come to schools in person, even in the event of a SEPTA work stoppage. The superintendent cynically proclaimed "[a]ttending school in-person provides our young people with the familiar routines, sense of community and support services that they need for their social, emotional and academic well-being," while failing to note the dangerous conditions that students were being placed under once inside unventilated rooms.

Rather than seeking to unify and broaden these fights, the TWU has been actively campaigning against the members' choice to strike if there is no contract given to them. A week ago, Brown was cited by *Axios* declaring "[w]e're going to do everything we can to avert a strike. If that's something that happens, it

happens out of our control."

It was announced last week that the Regional Rail system and commuter trains, which also serve the city of Philadelphia, would be kept in service to facilitate a strikebreaking effort against any potential work stoppage.

The *World Socialist Web Site Transit Worker Newsletter* encourages SEPTA workers to contact the WSWS and take the important step of forming independent rank-and-file organizations to defend their interests amid the efforts to place the economic and physical burdens of the pandemic on their backs.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact