

Philadelphia transit workers: oppose the TWU's sellout contract! Form independent rank-and-file committees!

World Socialist Web Site Transit Workers Newsletter
4 November 2021

The *World Socialist Web Site Transit Workers Newsletter* calls for the widest possible “no” vote in Friday’s contract vote by 5,000 transit workers in Philadelphia. Workers at the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority (SEPTA) are being made to vote by the Transport Workers Union on a deal which contains raises below the rate of inflation, minimal amounts of maternity leave and a one-time hazard payment which amounts to a bribe to try to force through the acceptance of the deal.

In a bid to head off a strike, which SEPTA workers voted unanimously to authorize in the event that their contract expired on October 31 without a decent offer, Transport Workers Union Local 234 leaders agreed to a two-year tentative agreement (TA) which offers only two annual raises of 3 percent. This would amount to a nearly five percent wage reduction over time under conditions of 5.4 percent annual inflation.

Workers would see a miserly 14-day maternity leave benefit, which, for an expecting family is no less than obscene. A one-time hazard pay infusion would top out at \$2,200. This payment is pegged to time worked during the pandemic and, perversely, would diminish in the event that workers spent any time sick or off the job.

That is only a limited list of the “highlights” that workers are being offered. In reality, the total content of the TA, if a full contract in fact even exists at this point, is being concealed. “It’s something we’re going to keep working on,” stated TWU 234 president Willie Brown last Friday in response to the absence from the agreement of financial support to the families of workers that died of COVID-19.

SEPTA has sought to justify its low payouts due to

the ongoing impact of the pandemic in depressing the transit system’s ridership. In fact, there is more than enough money to guarantee a high standard of living and safe working conditions for all.

But this money is being squandered on the super-rich, who have benefited from trillions of dollars handed by the federal government to the banks and major corporations under the CARES Act, which has sent the stock market surging to record highs in spite of mass death. US billionaire wealth has increased by 70 percent while nearly 750,000 Americans, and an estimated 15 million worldwide, have died from the pandemic. Seventeen billionaires live in the state of Pennsylvania, with a collective wealth of \$55 billion, according to *Forbes*.

The contract is a slap in the face of the SEPTA workers, who have been kept on their jobs throughout the full duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, to expect them to fall for such an insulting “offer.” Philadelphia transit workers should ask themselves: If the TA was incomplete, then why is it being offered for a vote? Furthermore, what is to stop management and TWU negotiators from back-filling the as-yet-unseen agreement with all sorts of other concessions in the event that it is ratified?

There already are signs that transit workers are seeing through this naked strikebreaking effort. “[TWU Local] 234 could not negotiate themselves out of a wet paper bag,” reads a typical comment from a transit worker on social media. Local 234 “members were disrespected during the pandemic and [if] they agree to this tentative agreement it’s only going to get worse,” says another.

An immediate “no” vote is an essential first step to mounting a real fight against both SEPTA management

and its effort to put the full burden of the COVID-19 pandemic on the backs of workers. But recent experiences confirm that the union will not respond to a rejection by fighting for workers' demands but by redoubling their efforts to force through a sellout.

The TWU will no doubt tell workers that this is the best contract that they can possibly get. This is a lie. Conditions are more favorable now for workers to win their demands than they have been in decades, as hundreds of thousands of workers across the country and the world are entering into struggle. But the most immediate obstacle which the growing movement of the working class confronts is the trade unions, which are completely integrated with management and are seeking to prevent and isolate strikes as much as possible.

Thus, the IATSE union, much like the TWU, called off a strike by 60,000 television and movie workers at the last minute in October, announcing a TA which was not even completed when it was announced. In the Midwest, the United Auto Workers union is trying to force an end to the month-long strike at John Deere, after workers rebelled against a sellout deal and rejected it by 55 to 45 percent, reprising their role in betraying the Volvo Trucks strike this summer, as well as at auto parts maker Dana.

At Volvo, Dana and Deere, rank-and-file committees, independent of and in opposition to the pro-corporate union, played, and are continuing to play, the essential role in rallying workers against the company-union conspiracies against them. SEPTA workers must follow this example and form a rank-and-file committee of their own, which will provide the means for them to expand their struggle, fight for support within the working class in Pennsylvania and throughout the country and avoid being isolated by the TWU.

Appeals for support by a transit workers rank-and-file committee would find a powerful response because they occupy a critical position within the economic infrastructure. "A strike [in Philadelphia] would have shut down bus, trolley and subway services in the city, disrupting commutes for thousands of riders," stated *Axios* in an article this week.

Such a committee must call for support from other critical sections of the transit workers, including 350 Piedmont Airline flight attendants at the Philadelphia International Airport who also have voted to strike, bus

drivers in Akron, Ohio's Rapid Transit Authority (RTA) and Las Cruces, New Mexico, and to Philadelphia school teachers, who fought bravely last winter and spring to resist the bipartisan drive to reopen the Philadelphia School District to in-person classes.

The rush to force through this contract reflects that the political establishment fears the impact that a transit strike would be contagious. Moreover, they are worried that the paralyzing of the city's transit system upon which hundreds of thousands of workers rely would jeopardize the campaign to force workers back into unsafe factories and workplaces and children into unsafe school buildings.

Not only major corporations but both political parties, Democratic Governor Tom Wolf and President Biden, as well as governments around the world, are sabotaging public measures to prevent the spread of Covid as "too costly" to the economy—that is, to the stock portfolios of the rich. Scientists have shown, however, that it is possible and necessary to eliminate the transmission of the virus within the world's population. But to implement them, what is required is the mobilization of the working class, in alliance with the most progressive and serious layers of medical scientists, on an international scale to fight for them, and against the profit motive which has become the chief obstacle to finally ending the pandemic.

The WSWS *Transit Workers Newsletter* stands ready to assist workers ready to take this vital step. Contact us today to discuss forming a rank-and-file committee



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact