SEIU abruptly cancels strike for 2,000 Philadelphia school workers in abject capitulation to school officials and the Democratic Party

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1 September 2022

On August 26, 2022, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 32BJ called off a strike that it had announced the week prior. Over 2,000 School District of Philadelphia (SDP) bus drivers and attendants, mechanics, trade workers and building cleaners had authorized a strike to demand higher wages, adequate training programs and safer conditions when the two-year contract expired on August 31, 2022.

Philadelphia school bus drivers and janitors make on average $15-16 an hour. For a bus driver, this equates to little more than $12,000 during a typical school year.

In advance of the prospective strike, SEIU assistant district head John Bynum made demagogic statements playing to workers' demands. "The Philadelphia School District needs to respect us, protect us, and pay us living wages. Bus drivers, cleaners, and those who kept our schools open during the pandemic were called essential, now it's time for that to be reflected in a fair contract for Philadelphia School District workers."

But as determined as workers were to strike for these demands, the union leadership was just as determined to prevent a strike. It inked a tentative agreement no more than a week later with the school district and the city's Democratic Mayor Jim Kenney, behind the backs of the rank and file.

Without giving members a chance to see the offer and decide if it was worth considering, the local leadership immediately abandoned its threats and posturing.

On August 26, Local 32BJ vice president Gabe Morgan declared that the TA "honors the enormous contributions and sacrifices that 32BJ school workers have made, including risking their lives throughout the pandemic."

After the cancellation of the strike, Morgan and Local 32BJ spun the sellout contract as a win, never releasing any details other than boilerplate phrases. The union's website states the TA provides "historic wage increases" and gives "millions in funding for additional standardized training programs." It "maintains excellent pension and employer paid health benefits" and "protects paid sick leave and paid vacation."

Completely omitted from this adjective-laden rhetoric is any reference to COVID-19, monkeypox or specific safety protocols to keep school workers and students safe from infection.

Larisa Shambaugh, the SDP's managerial chief talent officer, said in the press release that school officials were more than pleased with the TA, claiming it showed the "deep respect" the system has for the 2,000 employees. "We see the amazing work they do every day to safely transport our students to and from school and provide them with clean and healthy learning environments that support their academic success."

The SDP official also said, "We all look forward to the starting of the new school year with the certainty that we will do so without disruption to in-person learning for students and families." This was a telling admission of the real reason for the haste with which the local reached a deal with the school district, as classes started on Monday, August 29.

The exact date of the Philadelphia School District workers' ratification vote has not been publicized other than to state that it will take place sometime in September, weeks into the regular school year.

The motive for undoing the planned strike was also revealed in an article in *Axios*. The publication warns that, "A labor stoppage… could have significantly disrupted the first week of in-person classes for the district…"

As the school year begins, Philadelphia schools are facing an acute crisis. For years, the School District of Philadelphia, representing 124,000 students, has been beset by horrible conditions.

On Monday, the SDP announced that 118 schools "that do not have sufficient cooling systems… will dismiss three hours earlier than their normal dismissal times on Tuesday and Wednesday, August 30-31, 2022," due to an extreme heat warning.

This follows a report from the PennPIRG Education Fund and the PennEnvironment Research & Policy Center that determined that 98 percent of all schools had at least one open faucet where lead was detected beyond an acceptable level.

The Philadelphia metropolitan area is estimated to be the nation's ninth largest metropolitan economy, and is home to five Fortune 1000 companies. Yet, according to Pew Research, nearly 400,000 Philadelphia residents–roughly 26 percent of the city's

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population—lived below the inadequate “official” poverty line in 2017.

Skyrocketing inflation on basic food items and gasoline, triggered by both the government’s failure to eradicate COVID-19 and the proxy war in Ukraine, has further deepened poverty in the city.

During the height of the Omicron surge, when bus drivers, cleaners and teachers were classified as essential and risked their lives, former SDP Superintendent William Hite, backed by Jerry Jordan of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), reopened schools, despite massive public opposition to the reopening plans.

The return to the classroom led to numerous COVID-19 infections, long COVID, and deaths among workers, students and parents.

Local 32BJ followed Jordan and the PFT’s lead, refusing to defend their own members' safety, while now hypocritically bemoaning a policy that the local had enforced.

The collusion between the SEIU leadership, the school district and Democratic politicians against rank-and-file workers has no limits.

In a press release before the strike deadline, Local 32BJ said “workers agreed to pay cuts and mandatory weekly contributions from their pay to help fund the school district budget, keeping children in school and sparing thousands from unemployment due to school closures.”

For decades the local has used the threat of layoffs, while at the same time exploiting their own members’ sincere devotion to the education of children, to help impose the city’s school budget cuts, cuts that have been presided over by the Democratic Party in many circumstances.

The well-paid bureaucrats who run today’s nationalist, pro-capitalist unions routinely shut down strikes and bar any discussion of tentative agreements before workers have a chance to review the details. The historic principle, “no contract, no work,” has been long discarded by the unions, including the SEIU.

The SEIU has a sordid track record of betrayal. At the same time as the strike in Philadelphia was being abandoned, SEIU Local 500 shut down a five-day strike by about 550 American University staff in Washington, D.C., employing the same tactic of calling off a strike before workers had the chance to ratify an agreement.

The SEIU intervened to shut down the strike at the behest of campus management to minimize disruption to the university. It had previously refused to expand the strike by American University staff by calling out adjunct teachers and grad students. The SEIU justified this scab behavior by referring to the “no-strike” clauses that it had imposed on these other school employees.

Previously, SEIU Local 32BJ cut short a three-day strike by 700 New York City area airport workers at Newark Liberty International Airport and John F. Kennedy and LaGuardia in July 2017. The workers walked off the job and voted to strike in response to unfair and illegal labor practices by the company, Prime Flight, that was stonewalling negotiations.

SEIU 32BJ called off the strike once the company entered into “negotiations” at the behest of the Democratic Party. Moreover, a separate strike by 32BJ at the Philadelphia International airport was also called off after American Airlines agreed to last-minute discussions with the same company, Prime Flight.

Morgan, the executive vice-president and Local 32BJ Pennsylvania and Delaware state director, pockets total compensation of $155,850 in 2019, according to the union’s webpage. This is in stark contrast to the miserable salaries his organization has “negotiated” for workers in his district.

The SEIU is not the only education union involved in strikebreaking. Recently, the Columbus Education Association (CEA), an affiliate of the National Education Association, issued a 10-day strike notice for 4,500 Columbus City School teachers and staff in Columbus, Ohio. After only three days, the CEA orchestrated a shutdown of the strike, announcing a “conceptual agreement” that outraged educators. At a ratification meeting the CEA refused to even hand out a copy of the contract to teachers.

The deal imposed on Columbus teachers does nothing to protect them from COVID and monkeypox. Nor does it address runaway inflation and unsafe conditions in schools due to the terrible degradation of school buildings under the impact of decades of cuts.

The time to act is now. Philadelphia school workers should begin organizing opposition to the sabotage of their fight by the SEIU by forming a rank-and-file committee to decide and fight for the demands workers want, in opposition to Morgan and the union apparatus, who are colluding with the SDP and Democratic politicians to make workers pay for the massive cuts in education.

In this fight school workers have powerful allies. SPD workers should reach out to other sections of the working class and to the Pennsylvania Rank-and-File Safety Committee to develop a coordinated counteroffensive against the capitalist system as well as the two big business political parties and their lackeys in the union bureaucracy.

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