

Philadelphia transit union leaders defy members' vote to strike as contract expires

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On November 7, union leaders from the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 234 kept workers on the job as their one-year contract expired, in defiance of the will of the membership.

On October 27, members of Local 234 voted unanimously to authorize a strike against SEPTA because their one-year contract was set to expire at midnight on November 8.

“We’re still talking,” TWU Local 234 President Brian Pollitt told reporters on November 7 as negotiations ended. In a highly revealing comment, Pollitt said, “I’ll roll my sleeves up and bang on the table and do everything I have to do to avoid a strike,” preceding the decision.

TWU Local 234 covers around 5,000 workers in Philadelphia who are bus drivers, transit operators and others involved in transit work. They have been working under a one-year contract which included a single 3 percent raise. This followed the previous 2021-2022 contract which saw a 6 percent raise over two years. The paltry raises were swallowed by a massive spike in inflation, which has continued to the present.

SEPTA had previously offered a contract with no wage increase, but according to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, it “moved off that position Thursday” without explaining what its new stance was. In addition, another key concern is driver safety in response to violent crime.

In justifying the low wage offers, SEPTA has claimed poverty, noting it is running a \$240 million deficit. Like transit systems throughout the United States and globally that have suffered massive declines in ridership in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the service has used up the last of its federal pandemic funds and is now seeking deep budget cuts.

A one-time infusion of \$161 million to SEPTA was shot down earlier in the year by the Pennsylvania State Senate. This led to SEPTA increasing their fare prices by 30 percent. The Senate claimed that the money had to be used to build bridges and repair infrastructure, but were more than willing to increase the state police’s budget by \$200 million compared to last year.

Workers at the fifth largest transit system in the United States have been left totally in the dark about what is currently happening with their contract negotiations.

According to the rules of Local 234, even if members vote to authorize a strike, the president of the local has the final say in a strike authorization. Pollitt also told reporters on October 27 that “It feels great that I have the right to pull the plug—and, make no mistake, I don’t want to. I want to continue to bargain fairly in hopes that we can reach a good deal, but if I have to [call a strike], I will.”

Prior to overturning the members’ strike vote, media reports suggested Local 234 and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) District Council 33, which covers 9,000 blue-collar workers, could hold a joint strike after District Council 33 workers voted to strike due to its contract expiring back in June this year.

On Wednesday, ABC News reported that the municipal workers had completed a strike authorization vote and would “give a 10-day warning about a potential strike,” raising the possibility of a complete halt to many essential city operations.

The TWU’s effort to shut down the members’ strike comes just days after the 2024 US presidential elections, which saw the fascist Republican Donald Trump win against Democrat Kamala Harris.

In the aftermath of the election, in which Trump has

threatened dictatorship and mass deportation, the Democratic Party has turned all of its efforts toward ensuring a “transfer of power” to the incoming president. It has worked in a close partnership with the trade union bureaucracy to suppress eruptions of the class struggle in order to keep workers tied to their corporate and war agenda.

The decision to block the strike by the union bureaucracy demonstrates the fear of the ruling class of a rebellion from below breaking out.

SEPTA workers must break the stranglehold imposed upon them by their local leadership in order to carry out an effective struggle for their living standards. As has been already revealed, no trust can be given to the local bureaucrats, who will override their votes on any issue.

Workers must form independent rank-and-file committees which will allow them to expand their struggle to other sections of workers in both SEPTA and throughout the region. A particular appeal must be to the municipal workers to join them for a joint strike.

Likewise, while TWU and SEPTA leaders appeal to the state Democrats in Harrisburg for funds, a demand to defend the jobs of CabinetWorks workers in nearby Thompsettown, who are threatened with layoffs as the country’s largest private cabinet manufacturer plans to cut jobs.



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