

Philadelphia sanitation workers prepare to take strike vote against city's austerity demands

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Philadelphia sanitation workers affiliated with AFSCME District Council 33 (DC 33), the city's largest municipal workers union, will take a strike authorization vote on Tuesday amid tense contract negotiations with City Hall. The vote will take place at the union's University City headquarters.

In addition to the AFSCME local, contracts for the city's firefighters and white-collar workers are also scheduled to expire at the end of this month, raising the prospect of a unified struggle in all public sectors.

DC 33 includes more than 9,000 mostly blue-collar city employees, including sanitation workers, street department crews and water department staff. Discussions over the union's current contract, a one-year extension previously negotiated November 22, 2024, have stalled over key issues such as wage increases, health benefits, sick leave and overtime rules.

And at the end of August, the contract for 12,000 Philadelphia public school teachers expires. The school district faces a massive funding shortfall projected at \$2 billion over the next five years, which the city will attempt to claw back through massive cuts.

"This right here is exactly why we should have shown solidarity and the true power in numbers back in November," said a worker in response to DC 33's announcement of a "special general membership meeting" to discuss the current negotiations. "STICK TOGETHER!!! A Water Main Broke, right after we settled for that 1 year deal. ... Stand for one another to make sure we are fairly compensated. None of us are paid fairly, regardless of department. Covid monies that we weren't given, the 6-year pay freeze we dealt with and had to keep the previous deal in place; Almost a billion dollars they didn't bother to give us."

The city's proposal, dated January 31, 2025, includes pay raises "consistent with the City's ability to pay and the Five-Year Plan." Cherelle Parker, the city's Democratic mayor, introduced the plan and her "One Philly 2.0" budget for fiscal year 2025-2026 for the first time in March. It consists of numerous pro-business policies and tax cuts intended to "signal to businesses that they could invest in the city in the long run," reducing the city's overall revenue. The budget vote will be taken up by the Philadelphia city council later this week.

Parker has cynically sought to sugar coat this poison pill with promises of nearly \$800 million in investment for affordable housing. However, according to the Philadelphia Housing Authority, the city needs \$6.3 billion to modernize and redevelop 13,000 existing public housing units and another \$2.5 billion for 7,000 new units, with over 100,000 residents on waiting lists.

The city is also seeking to change how health and welfare benefits are administered, aiming to consolidate all city workers under a single policy to reduce costs. This move is being opposed by the union, which has historically managed its own benefit plans. The proposed changes—such as higher co-pays and deductibles, stricter sick leave rules and expanded use of part-time workers—are clear attacks on workers' living standards and jobs.

Additionally, workers are also demanding a multiyear contract with significant wage increases, rejecting the city's preference for another one-year extension.

The union has tried to strike a tough pose with the city. Following last week's announcement of an emergency meeting, the union posted images taken from the 1986 municipal workers' strike, when garbage

piled up on city streets and public services ground to a halt.

However, behind the scenes and in public statements, officials of District Council 33 have signaled to city officials that their posturing is for show.

DC 33 President Greg Boulware told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “We’ll give every opportunity to the city to see reason and acknowledge the plight of our membership,” while the union has promised the city a 10-day advance notice if a strike is planned, allowing the parties to seek a deal before any action is taken.

While workers want a united fight among all their fellow city employees, many are denouncing DC 33’s posturing. Many have responded to the union’s announcements with anger following similar pledges for a unified struggle last year which were betrayed after workers had voted to strike.

In October, transit workers in the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) voted to strike but were kept on the job by the Transportation Workers Union (TWU) Local 234 leadership, which forced through a substandard deal afterward. During those negotiations the prospect of a unified city worker strike was dangled in the air only to amount to nothing.

“We did this six months ago and then we agreed to this contract, which was [BS] from the very beginning. Everyone knew we weren’t gonna get what they promised us,” said one worker, receiving numerous “likes.” Another worker spoke similarly stating, “We should have ... did the strike vote the first time around !! ... it seems like we didn’t because we decided to give the city the benefit of the doubt...”

Sanitation workers have every reason to be skeptical of their leaders. The latter routinely posture with threats of strikes to placate their members, only to abandon the pledge and secure concessionary contracts.

It is essential for workers to take action by forming rank-and-file organizations at their own initiative that are capable of uniting all city workers while also being solely accountable to the workers.

These committees should take up the conduct of how an effective struggle can be fought while defending their members from retaliation, abuse and the unsafe conditions of work which sanitation work entails.

Workers should read about the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), as

well as the latter’s investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death of Stellantis autoworker Ronald Adams Sr., who died over two months ago under mysterious circumstances at his Michigan plant which the company, the government and the United Auto Workers union have sought to cover up.

The purpose of the investigation, to help in “empowering the working class to assert its own interests, including the fundamental right to a safe workplace,” applies equally to the current struggle in Philadelphia.



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