

# Philadelphia city workers vote overwhelmingly to strike

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Nearly 9,000 municipal workers in Philadelphia’s largest city union, AFSCME District Council 33 (DC 33), have voted by 95 percent to authorize a strike when their contract expires June 30. The union includes sanitation, water, airport and other essential workers, whose labor keeps the city functioning.

DC 33 is one of four major municipal unions in Philadelphia, including the police and firefighters unions and AFSCME District Council 47. In addition, educators in the city’s public schools have voted this week to authorize strike action if a new contract is not in place by the end of August. The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) covers more than 13,000 teachers and school workers.

Workers at SEPTA, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority, are facing off against drastic cuts over a projected \$240 million budget deficit. Agency officials are already planning 45 percent service cuts, a 21.5 percent fare hike, elimination of 50 bus routes and five Regional Rail lines, implementation of a 9 p.m. rail curfew, layoffs, and hiring freezes. Although a funding bill is currently making its way through the state legislature, the crisis in the transit agency raises the potential for a broader struggle in defense of public services.

Municipal budget crises are sweeping the country. In Denver, a \$250 million shortfall has led to immediate job freezes, layoffs and cuts across core services. San Francisco is dealing with an \$800 million deficit, and the mayor is proposing to eliminate around 100 city jobs and hundreds of nonprofit contracts.

Washington D.C. is confronting a \$1.1 billion budget hole after Congress failed to pass a new funding bill. In Chicago, city schools and public transit face funding shortfalls, threatening school closures, over 1,600 teacher layoffs and up to 40 percent transit cuts.

Public services are being slashed to redirect funds to Wall Street and the military. President Trump’s “Big Beautiful Bill” would include massive tax cuts for the wealthy as well as more than \$800 billion in cuts to Medicaid, as well as sharp cuts to food stamps and other programs.

The vote by DC 33 members comes after the city sent a proposal in January with a vague offer for pay increases “consistent with the City’s ability to pay and the Five-Year Plan.” The city later elaborated by offering a mere 2 percent increase in wages, well below the current rate of inflation—in other words, a pay cut.

Workers are demanding significant wage increases, better health benefits and a multi-year contract in opposition to the city’s preference for another one-year extension of the contract.

The union’s current contract was the result of a rotten agreement worked out between union officials and Mayor Cherelle Parker’s office to allow for a one-year extension of their contract back in November 2024. Prior to that sellout deal, workers had voted by 87 percent to authorize a strike.

Workers of DC 33 are among the lowest-paid municipal workers in any major US city—despite Philadelphia being the nation’s sixth-largest city.

Many city employees, including sanitation workers, 911 operators and maintenance crews, struggle to keep pace with the city’s rising cost of living. Starting pay for some positions starts at just above \$16 an hour. Prevailing wages at city-owned facilities hover between \$17 to \$18 an hour.

This is not enough to afford basic necessities such as housing, healthcare and groceries, especially as inflation and housing costs have outpaced modest annual raises. Workers are also dealing with hazardous conditions, understaffing, and increased workloads,

particularly in high-risk neighborhoods and during emergencies.

DC 33 union officials have tried to strike a tough pose with the city, with a Facebook post from the union recalling the 1986 municipal workers' strike, when garbage piled up on city streets and public services ground to a halt.

But workers are responding to this posturing with anger, especially after the union betrayal after last November's strike vote. One worker commented on Facebook that "anything less than what we asked for is unacceptable," adding that the union should "do another emergency meeting when a new contract comes from the city so everyone can get riled up and vote no."

Another worker on Facebook said that the union "sold us out and [took] the one year bs deal. The strike was authorized and then we did nothing."

Behind the "tough" public statements, the leadership of DC 33 has made clear that they do not want a strike and that all the posturing is purely for show.

DC 33 president Greg Boulware told Fox 29 that he hopes that "over these next two weeks, the city comes to the table with meaningful conversation that we can work towards to avoid this strike." Boulware also told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that the leadership of DC 33 will "give every opportunity to the city to see reason and acknowledge the plight of our membership."

Union leaders have promised to give the city a 10-day notice in the event of a planned strike, allowing the union time to prepare yet another "last-minute" betrayal.

Workers also cite frustration with missed chances for joint action with other city unions and point to unfulfilled promises, such as pandemic hazard pay and compensation for years of stagnant wages.

The pending expiration of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers contract on August 31 shows the potential for broader united action. Educators are under conditions of overcrowded classrooms, low pay and chronic understaffing. But despite the obvious basis for a joint campaign across all city workers, the union leaderships have kept each contract fight isolated, preserving their backroom relationships with the Democratic Party administration.

The reality is that there is no real "bargaining" between AFSCME and the city of Philadelphia. The

city administration and the union bureaucracy are two sides of the same coin, both controlled by the same capitalist Democratic Party.

Each election cycle, AFSCME endorses and fundraises for the same city politicians who appoint the very administrators who are attacking workers' wages and conditions. In Pennsylvania, AFSCME Council 13, which covers over 40,000 public employees, spent over \$560,000 on political activities and lobbying in the 2022–23 fiscal year. Nationally, the union has donated more than \$126 million to federal campaigns and parties since 1990.

With the PFT's 94 percent strike authorization and SEPTA's planned mass service cuts, fare hikes and layoffs already moving forward, the case for coordinated, independent action by city workers across all sectors is clearer than ever. That unity must take shape through rank-and-file committees, not through the existing union leaderships, which continue to preserve their ties with the Democratic officials carrying out the austerity.

It is imperative that workers form rank-and-file committees on their initiative and independent of the union apparatus. These committees must unify city workers across all sectors based on their common class interests and show how an effective struggle can be waged.



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