

Philadelphia educators vote overwhelmingly to authorize first strike in 25 years

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On Tuesday, June 17, nearly 14,000 educators in the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) voted by 94 percent in favor of authorizing a strike when their contract expires on August 31. The union includes teachers, health staff, secretaries and custodians, who provide education and support services for 118,000 students in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP).

The strike authorization vote occurs at the same time as 9,000 municipal workers in Philadelphia's largest city union, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) District Council 33, voted by 95 percent to authorize a strike when their contract expires June 30.

The Philadelphia school district is underfunded by \$1.25 billion and is in need of nearly \$10 billion in repairs. The district was only able to avoid massive cutbacks because of \$1.8 billion in federal COVID-19 relief school funding it received over the last few years. However, the Biden administration allowed the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to expire before leaving office, pushing Philadelphia like so many other districts across the country over a "fiscal cliff."

This will only be worsened by the savage cuts to federal funding for low-income, English learners and other students by the Trump administration and Congress. Federal aid accounts for about 10 percent of the district's budget of more than \$4.5 billion. This includes over \$193 million in federal Title I formula aid the district received in 2024-25 and another \$43 million in Title I grants specifically for school improvement, according to district budget documents.

School officials say the district stands to lose approximately \$69.3 million in funds under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This includes:

- \$44.5 million in Title I funding for schools with at least 40 percent low-income students
- \$20.6 million in Title II funding for training educators
- And \$4.2 million in Title III funding for language instruction for those learning English

Of the roughly 2,000 teaching position vacancies in Pennsylvania, nearly 20 percent are within the Philadelphia school district. Furthermore, the number of new teacher certifications within the district has declined by 67 percent since 2014. Teachers in Philadelphia also make an average salary of \$62,443, about 20 percent lower compared to the state average of \$74,945.

The vote on Tuesday is the first strike authorization that the union had voted on since 2001 and a strike would be the first by teachers in Philadelphia since 2000. In 2001, the state of Pennsylvania, citing financial and education crises within the Philadelphia school district,

usurped control of the district under the State Reform Commission (SRC).

The commission held control of the district until 2018, and during that time, strikes were barred and the commission claimed authority to impose contracts unilaterally on the membership. Between 2012 to 2017, PFT members were not under any contract.

In 2014, the district sent layoff notices to 3,783 employees, including 676 teachers, 307 secretaries, 283 counselors, 127 assistant principals, 1,202 noontime aides and 769 supportive services assistants. The SRC's "doomsday" budget eliminated nearly all non-core staff, including counselors, librarians, art and music teachers and support personnel.

During this period under state control, teachers frequently went without pay increases. In 2014, the SRC unilaterally canceled their contract, forcing teachers to begin paying for a portion of their healthcare. In 2013, elementary student Laporshia Massey suffered a fatal asthma attack at school while staff watched helplessly. Her school's nurse had been eliminated by the SRC's cuts.

Emerging from this, teachers are demanding significant support and compensation. This includes the addition of paid parental leave, reduced class sizes, compensation for teaching oversized classrooms, easier access to severance and retirement pay, longer prep times, more training and better compensation for support staff. School workers demand the abolition of the hated "3-5-7-9" attendance policy, which penalizes them for taking their contractually allowed sick days.

A brief two-page readout provided by the PFT notes, "Veteran teachers in Philadelphia are required to have more credentials than suburban counterparts but on average earn far less."

A longtime teacher in the Philadelphia school system told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "They [the school administrators] are constantly adding more work. At the same time, our jobs have become more complex, more comprehensive" with the advent of new forms of technology. Teachers are increasingly becoming obligated to be the first and last line of support for students facing complicated challenges at home and in society. "It's become a thankless job," he explained.

The PFT's current contract was negotiated in 2021, hours before their previous contract was set to expire, in order to avoid a strike authorization vote that had large support among union members. The contract was set to expire in August 2024, but union officials struck a rotten deal with the city for a one-year extension of the contract in February 2024, six months before the contract's expiration.

With the one-year extension nearly up, the leadership of the PFT has not revealed what is the state of negotiations nor provided any comprehensive details on demands. Instead, all workers have to go on is a "contract explainer" that is two pages long and gives vague

information.

The strike vote is an important measure of the determination of educators to overturn decades of PFT-backed concessions to the Democratic Party establishment in Philadelphia and wage a collective fight against Trump's existential threat to public education and other core democratic rights. But this fight cannot be left in the hands of the PFT bureaucracy, which is a tool of the Democratic Party.

Instead, educators must take the initiative by forming rank-and-file committees in every school and neighborhood to prepare a city-wide strike action with municipal, transit and other workers, which can and must become the catalyst for a broader movement of educators and the entire working class to defeat Trump's effort to establish a dictatorship.

The teachers' strike ratification comes amid a general escalation of the class struggle in Philadelphia and throughout the country. The weekend before the strike ratification vote, over 5 million people joined the "No Kings" protests across the country against the Trump administration's assault on the United States Constitution. Philadelphia, the site where the Declaration of Independence and US Constitution were drafted, saw one of the biggest protests in the country at nearly 80,000 participants.

In response to the mass outpouring of popular protest, the Trump administration has doubled down on its plans to deport millions of immigrants and create an American presidential dictatorship. He has coupled that with the launching of unprovoked war against the Iranian people in the Middle East.

In the SDP, nearly 20,000 students, or 17.6 percent of the total 120,000 student population, are registered as "English Learners," a close proxy for someone with an immigrant background. "I've had students questioned by 'police' who turn out to be ICE," said the veteran SDP teacher. "They know their rights," he observed, but still noted that the highly publicized immigration raids have terrified them.

"Every time there has been a raid, my [immigrant] students tend to disappear from class for a few weeks," he said. "It's gotten to the point where those students won't even tell new students their names," in fear that it could be reported to an ICE agent.

It also coincides with the growth of class struggle in Philadelphia, including the overwhelming vote for strike action by municipal workers. In addition, employees at the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority, SEPTA, are confronting a financial "death spiral" as the transit agency anticipates a \$213 million budget shortfall. SEPTA workers voted to strike in November and were infamously kept at work by Transport Workers Union Local 234, even after their contract had lapsed.

Management has proposed slashing service by nearly half, raising fares by over 20 percent, discontinuing 50 bus routes and five Regional Rail lines, introducing a 9:00 p.m. curfew for rail service, and implementing both layoffs and a freeze on new hires. Likewise, in nearby Delaware County in suburban Philadelphia, the bankruptcy and closure of the regional hospital system has exposed the deadly role of finance capital as it plunders society for ill-gotten profits.

The social crisis in the Philadelphia region is part of a much broader attack on the working class under the capitalist two-party system. The working class is being made to pay for a massive social crisis not of its making through cuts to anything deemed "non-essential" to profit.

This finds a direct expression in the Trump administration's dismantling of public education and declarations to close the Department of Education. Trump has appointed World Wrestling

Entertainment billionaire Linda McMahon to head the Department of Education. Both Trump and McMahon have proposed billions in cuts to educational programs and grants, impacting the future of public education.

The PFT is seeking to suppress its members' struggle in the face of these historic attacks. PFT President Arthur Steinberg, in comments to the press, stated, "While the PFT Collective Bargaining Team has made progress toward an agreement," the school system "has been slower to meet us halfway on key demands by our members." In other words, Steinberg is saying the PFT negotiators have already made critical concessions to the school district in the process of bargaining. What they now want is to be met "halfway" with a fig leaf to disguise the concessions they have made.

The strike authorization vote comes two months before the contract ends, allowing the union leadership time to prepare a sellout contract to ram through the membership. Critically, the plans for striking would occur a week after the SDP school year starts on August 25. Not only would this undermine momentum for a work stoppage, but it would isolate the educators from the sanitation workers struggle, presumably starting July 1.

Philadelphia teachers looking for a fight should study the experience of Chicago teachers. In April, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), the PFT's sister union, lied to its members.

The CTU, which counts the city's Democratic Mayor Brandon Johnson among its former members, promised educators job protections and a "Trump-proof" contract in exchange for not going on strike. No sooner was the ink dry on the newly ratified agreement than the city announced a wave of job cuts and school closures. The new contract had nothing protecting the roughly 1,600 teachers slated to lose their jobs.

It is an absolute necessity that Philadelphia teachers form independent committees in their workplaces and across the school system to unify them to wage a genuine struggle which will not be sold out. They must form bonds with sanitation workers, transit workers, healthcare workers in their region and beyond to prepare a critical fight against the deplorable working conditions all of them face. Such a struggle is a necessary step toward the movement for a general strike, which is necessary in the fight against Trump's attempt to establish a dictatorship in the United States.

To join and expand the network of Educators Rank-and-File Committees, fill out the form below.



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