

# Philadelphia sanitation workers and educators push for strike action

Landon Gourov, Andrew Lawrence  
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Approximately 9,000 Philadelphia municipal workers in AFSCME District Council 33 (DC 33) are set to go on strike when their current contract expires at midnight on June 30. The union includes sanitation, water, airport and other essential workers, whose labor keeps the city functioning.

At the same time, 14,000 educators in the city's school district have voted to authorize a strike. The public school system faces a \$300-\$400 million funding gap in the coming fiscal year. Meanwhile, the school district projects a \$2 billion gap over the next five years.

A similar situation exists in the public transit system, where a \$213 million structural deficit threatens to create a "death spiral" for commuters who rely on the trains, once the new fiscal year begins, also next week. Other cities as well, such as Washington, D.C. (\$1.1 billion); Chicago, Illinois (\$1.1 billion); Denver, Colorado (\$50-\$200 million this year and next) and Austin, Texas (\$33.4 million), face substantial financial deficits.

The sanitation strike would be the first work stoppage conducted by the union since 1986. "As it stands, District Council 33 is preparing to initiate a strike on June 30, 2025, at midnight," declared the union's social media account on Wednesday. DC 33 stated that the "decision has not been made lightly, and it reflects the current state of negotiations and our commitment to achieving fair and just outcomes for all involved."

City workers in DC 33 want to see improvements in pay, benefits and contract length. They have demanded a four-year contract with consecutive annual pay raises of 8 percent. The city has offered instead a three-year contract with 2 percent raises, while also demanding changes to healthcare benefits and stricter rules about sick pay.

Cities and school districts across the country are facing massive budget deficits, as education and public services are being bled dry and redirected to the stock market and for war. In Chicago, the school district is on the verge of voiding its recent contract with the Chicago Teachers Union in order to cut the budget deficit, and the city's transit system is warning of a 40 percent cut to service.

The stage is being set for major showdowns between municipal and school workers against the pro-corporate city

governments and the ruling class as a whole. In California, contracts at virtually every major school district also expire this summer. There is enormous potential for teachers' strikes to intersect with the mass demonstrations against Trump into a powerful movement against capitalist inequality, dictatorship and war.

Two weeks ago, a record number of people protested throughout the United States against the Trump administration's attacks on democratic rights and efforts to build a presidential dictatorship. One of the largest of the protests was held in Philadelphia.

But activating the potential for such a movement requires that workers organize to defeat attempts by the union bureaucracy, joined at the hip with the capitalist political establishment, to block or limit strikes and to redirect workers into cringing appeals to the powers-that-be.

An example on this came on Tuesday, when leaders of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers appeared on stage jointly with members of the School District of Philadelphia administration to plead with the state legislature for funding. PFT leaders sought to present the district leaders, who have carried out wave after wave of attacks on teachers, as having the interests of the city's children at heart.

PFT president Arthur Steinberg noted, "It's the first time we ever have come up here jointly" to throw themselves at the feet of lawmakers. He added:

"As a labor leader, it is my responsibility to help ensure that our workers' rights are protected and that they're working conditions, which after all, are our students' learning conditions, are fair, healthy, and safe.

"And though we may disagree at times, I know that [SDP] Superintendent [Tony] Watlington and Board President [Reginald] Streater want what our members want: Appropriately staffed and resourced schools where children and communities are able to thrive."

Since DC 33 workers voted 95 percent in favor of striking back on June 12, the union leadership has been attempting to strike a tough pose with the city of Philadelphia. This continued on Wednesday, when DC 33 officials conducted an internal union meeting purporting to brief the membership about what to expect in the event of a strike.

“I got to tell you, I find the conduct by the city of Philadelphia deplorable and lacking tact or dignity and respect for our membership,” stated DC 33 president Greg Boulware. “Last Friday, we met with the city and they left myself and vice president [Antoine] Little sitting in the conference room for over an hour and a half waiting for them, until we finally left.”

“I had a mind to leave very shortly after we got there [today] when we saw how they were coming at us,” he continued.

However, Boulware and the DC 33 officials are doing everything to limit the impact of a strike. When Boulware informed the membership that weekly strike pay would total a pitiful \$200 a week, many members objected.

“We are expected to be on the line for \$200 and pay \$500 a week in daycare? Instead of staying home and saving that extra \$300 because we will be kicked from the union? That’s wild,” stated one worker. Another worker added that “many people have to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. Wouldn’t it be nice to earn enough at this one job!”

Boulware, feeling pressure from the rank and file after being told to pick between childcare and starving on the picket line, conceded that he would also forgo payments during the strike: “I don’t get paid on a strike. And neither will any of the officers be getting paid on a strike. The only people that’ll get paid during the strike in this building are district council 33 staff. They’re not union members.”

The DC 33 leadership expects to starve its members into submission, mounting a strike that will do more damage to its own members’ financial well being than it will to their employers in the city administration.

Boulware sought to justify the pitifully low strike pay on the well-worn claim that a more sizable amount would be “unsustainable” and bankrupt DC 33’s \$4.2 million strike fund.

In reality, there is more than enough resources to ensure the strikers are adequately provisioned for a drawn-out fight. DC 33 has over \$29 million in net assets, financed by workers’ dues money. This is enough for \$750 per week strike pay for all 9,000 members for four weeks. And AFSCME’s national headquarters has more than \$311 million in assets.

The union leadership’s main concern is seeking to curry favor with the Democratic Party establishment that leads the city. DC 33 plays a critical role in suppressing the working class’ attempts to mount a struggle against the big business interests which dominate it.

This has been visible in the current contract, which was extended last year so that the struggle of Philadelphia’s public workers would not impact the Democratic Party’s chances in the 2024 elections. A similar one-year extension was pushed through for the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) workers. Transit workers voted last November to strike but were forced to remain at work by their leadership, the Transport Workers Union Local 234.

For all DC 33’s tough talk directed at Philadelphia’s

Democratic Mayor Cherelle Parker, it cannot avoid that it has been complicit in supporting the pro-business administration. DC 33’s sanitation workers unions even went so far as breaking with the other union locals to endorse her candidacy in the city’s 2023 election.

In the same breath that DC 33 president Boulware proclaimed the union was broke, he referenced that it was taking loans and various grants associated with other union activities.

While sanitation workers have emerged as the first in an incoming strike wave which threatens the political establishment in the region, leaders of the various trade union apparatuses have sought to bury the consecutive strike votes and struggles.

No leaders have raised the prospect of a united struggle of the various workers, let alone raised the political importance of a strike wave to defend workers’ rights, and democracy itself, against the fascist reaction of the Trump administration.

The critical question is that workers establish control over the struggle by forming their own organizations, rank-and-file committees. Such committees must organize to appeal for broad support from the city’s working class, demand adequate strike pay and impose workers’ control over the entire process, including both bargaining and the conduct of the strike.

In particular, city workers must link up with Philadelphia teachers.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* stated when the teachers’ strike ratification was announced:

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, and 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.



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