

With Philadelphia municipal workers strike looming, mayor offers miserable pay increase

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Negotiations between the city of Philadelphia and the union representing over 9,000 sanitation workers and other trades continued throughout the weekend and overnight Sunday to avert a work stoppage set for midnight Monday. As of this writing, no deal has been announced.

The looming strike occurs as 14,000 city educators have also voted to go out on strike at the end of August. In addition to municipal workers associated with AFSCME District Council 33, another 3,000 municipal workers affiliated with AFSCME Local 47 have also voted to strike.

The struggle unfolds against a budget crisis in the city that led the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) to adopt a “doomsday budget” last Thursday. “We have to budget not on hope but on reality,” said SEPTA General Manager Scott A. Sauer to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. The budget would slash services in the coming fiscal year by nearly half.

The term “doomsday budget” was also used to describe a similarly catastrophic funding bill for the city’s school district a decade ago. At that time, the School District of Philadelphia eliminated thousands of non-core positions, leaving the teachers and schools stripped of resources.

Budget crises are unfolding in major metropolitan centers all over the United States, with the proximate cause in many cases being the cutoff of pandemic assistance by the Biden administration last year.

In Chicago, the city’s have unveiled their own “doomsday budget” which would eliminate of over half of all bus routes, completely end weekend bus services and lay off thousands of transit workers.

The Philadelphia municipal strikes’ impact would shut down key parts of the city’s trash collection program, street and building maintenance and other critical services. Workers have particular leverage at the present time because it would impact the city amid “Welcome America,” its signature summer festival, as well as the July 4 weekend celebration this coming weekend.

Member of DC 33 are demanding annual wage increases of 8 percent a year over four years. They are currently working under a one-year extended contract, which came with a one-time five percent wage increase last year. The city is seeking to combine last year’s raise with an additional three year offer that would bring the total amount to 12 percent.

On Saturday, the city’s Democratic Mayor Cherelle Parker produced a video promoting this offer as the “largest one-term pay increase” given to municipal workers in decades. “I am unapologetically a pro-union, pro-labor, and pro-worker mayor,” she said. Parker added that the increase came to an average amount of \$2,383 per recipient.

But the city’s offer would not even cover the impact of inflation. According to official figures, inflation in Philadelphia just between the years 2022-2024 amounted to 16.8 percent. During this same period, Philadelphia municipal workers regularly missed raises, even as minimum wage pay increased slightly and private contractors saw raises.

Workers responded to Parkers’ proposal with contempt on social media. “Five percent or higher per year over 3 or 4 years, period... For 20% or nothing!!! we need it and we deserve it,” said a worker on the union’s social media page. “She needs to come out and try doing some of the work in the season that we do during the summer and winter months and she would

understand that it takes a lot of special people... while she sits in her office,” another said.

DC 33 leaders have continued meeting with the city negotiators throughout the weekend to try to avoid a strike. This is despite city negotiators’ provocative behavior, which includes continuously standing up union leaders at meetings, a fact that DC 33 leaders have admitted in union meetings.

According to the *Inquirer*, “Philadelphia’s municipal unions have in the past often worked on the terms of expired contracts—rather than striking—while new deals got hashed out.” It notes “this year, none of Philly’s other three major municipal unions—for police officers, firefighters, and white-collar workers like supervisors and medical professionals—are likely to have a contract in place for July 1.”

While DC 33’s leaders present themselves as striking a hard pose against the city, they have plans to string workers out on \$200 weekly pay rations. This low amount would hamstring workers in their fight before they even got started. This is even as the city union has assets totaling at around \$29 million, enough to guarantee members weekly strike pay of \$750 for up to four weeks, and the AFSCME national headquarters reported net assets of over \$300 million.

The bureaucrats are acting in defiance of the will of the rank-and-file precisely because of the enormous potential for a citywide and national struggle, which would undermine their own corrupt relations with city administrators and the Democratic Party which runs most large US cities.

This was shown by Philadelphia Federation of Teachers leaders’ decision to hold a joint press conference last week with the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) just a week after members had voted to strike against it.

Then, PFT president Arthur Steinberg appeared alongside SDP leaders and promoted the myth that their employers, “though we may disagree at times,” also “want what our members want: Appropriately staffed and resourced schools where children and communities are able to thrive.”

This transparent lie was exposed in less than 48 hours. On Thursday, the US Attorney for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania announced it was filing charges against the School District of Philadelphia because its officials “knowingly and regularly fail to

make necessary repairs” to schools cited for the presence of asbestos.

It is critical at this point that municipal and other city workers take steps to link their struggles together through the formation of their own workplace committees. These committees, organized independently of the official union leadership, will allow them to conduct a struggle with their full force as a class.

Rather than allowing their strikes to be separated and independently sold out, city workers must independently join forces to fight to expand their struggle throughout the working class.



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