

Philadelphia municipal workers launch largest strike in nearly 40 years

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1 July 2025

For the first time in nearly four decades, Philadelphia's largest municipal workers' union, AFSCME District Council 33 (DC 33), is on strike. The work stoppage is sending shockwaves through city operations and daily life. It is the first strike of municipal city workers since 1986.

More than 9,000 city employees have walked off the job, including sanitation workers, water department staff, 911 dispatchers, city mechanics and school crossing guards. The strike's immediate impact is being felt across a wide range of essential services.

The strike began at 12:01 a.m. on Tuesday, July 1, 2025, after last-minute negotiations between the union and Mayor Cherelle Parker's administration failed to produce a new contract. At the heart of the dispute are wages, pension improvements and healthcare benefits, with union leaders arguing that the city's offer—an 8 percent raise over three years—falls far short of what workers need to keep up with Philadelphia's rising cost of living.

DC 33 had demanded an 8 percent annual raise, citing that many members earn an average of \$46,000 a year, well below the estimated \$60,000 needed for a single person to live in the city.

But it is critical that striking municipal workers view themselves as the first wave in a massive class movement against the entrenched power of the corporate oligarchy, which rules through both Trump and through local Democratic Party administrations in cities across the country. Through unprecedented cuts to public services at every level, they are seeking to impose the cost of a growing economic crisis on the backs of the working class.

The strike emerges as the first in a wave of class struggle throughout the region. It comes weeks after the city of Philadelphia saw upwards of 80,000 people protesting against the Trump administration's attacks on democracy and immigrant workers. The protest was part of "No Kings" day, one of the largest single day protests in American history.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* attended rallies in dozens of cities throughout the country, issuing calls for protesters to mobilize "the immense strength of the working class ... against Trump's coup in a general strike—the utilization of the power of the workers, rooted in the process of

production, to bring production to a halt."

The conditions are increasingly favorable for such a movement to emerge. Last week, 14,000 School District of Philadelphia (SDP) educators and staff voted by 94 percent to go on strike if their contract lapses in August without a deal on the table.

Contracts for 3,000 law enforcement and public white collar workers affiliated with AFSCME District Council 47 also expired on Tuesday, although they are bound by law from striking.

Municipal workers across the country are fighting massive unprecedented cuts, as resources are being drained to pay for Wall Street and war. The Chicago transit system is preparing a "doomsday" budget which would cut service by 40 percent, while the school district is threatening to rip up a new teachers' contract for lack of funds. The New York City transit system has projected shortfalls of up to \$10 billion and earlier this year predicted a "summer of hell" without new funding.

Los Angeles is forecasting a \$1 billion deficit for next year; San Francisco, Oakland and San Diego have deficits in the hundreds of millions, Washington D.C. has lost its AAA credit rating. The transit systems and school districts in these cities also report major funding shortfalls.

The city of Philadelphia is also enacting vicious attacks on the working class population. On Thursday, June 26, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) adopted its own "doomsday budget," which would slash public transit services in half. In addition to thousands of transit workers being laid off, the loss of services will fundamentally impact working class people.

On Monday, the office of Democratic Mayor Cherelle Parker held a press conference to address concerns regarding the halting of vital services. The mayor used the meeting to declare that the city had made a "historic" but "fiscally responsible" offer to raise municipal worker pay by a total of 13 percent over four years.

The mayor listed other supposedly incredible proposals, such as an additional pay step in city workers' wages, "aligning DC 33's pay plan with other city bargaining units." The majority of her address was spent promoting the city's new budget for the fiscal year 2026.

Parker cited her “Housing Opportunities Made Easy (H.O.M.E.)” initiative, which includes a proposal to create and preserve 30,000 new units of affordable housing. This initiative, she said, was designed “all ... with people like our DC 33 members in mind.” Municipal workers in the city of Philadelphia are required to have lived inside the city for a year before hiring for a city job.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has noted that Parker’s budget was a list of “pro-business items and tax cuts.” It cited Parker’s own comments declaring it was designed to “signal to businesses that they could invest in the city in the long run.”

The Philadelphia Housing Authority has stated that the city would require \$6.3 billion simply to redevelop 13,000 already existing housing units, while over 100,000 people are currently waiting for available homes. Parker’s plan offers only \$2 billion total for housing.

Parker’s real attitude toward the city’s employees was revealed in her press comments when she claimed, without evidence, that there had been reports of “property vandalism ... associated with this work stoppage” and threatened police action against workers seeking to block scabs. Police Commissioner Kevin Bethel likewise asserted that they “cannot allow individuals to vandalize and harm and destroy.”

In fact, the strike has massive public support among the city’s population, with hundreds of declarations of solidarity on the DC 33 social media pages. On the city of Philadelphia’s subreddit, a comment with over 400 likes states that the individual wants to “drop my trash at city hall.” Another with 200 likes suggests that garbage be dropped off at the mayor’s house.

The mass support for the strike is even more significant given that the stoppage is impacting vital services, such as trash collection, public swimming pools and water treatment amid one of the hottest years on record. Last week, the city reached temperatures as hot as 117 degrees Fahrenheit (47.2 degrees Celsius).

Under these conditions, the bureaucrats of the city unions are engaged in a criminal effort to undermine the level of solidarity among the working class throughout the city. The AFSCME DC 33 leadership has purposefully sought to string out its already criminally underpaid members with a miserable weekly strike pay of \$200.

The union is claiming that nothing can be done given that the DC 33 strike fund is less than \$4.2 million. However, the district council has \$29 million in various loans and assets, and the national AFSCME union has over \$300 million. Workers should demand that these assets, financed through their dues money, be used to finance a major increase in strike pay to insure that they are provisioned for a protracted struggle.

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), which saw its members vote near unanimously to strike two weeks ago when their contract concludes in August, has sought to downplay its members’ strike vote, appearing on stage with officials of the

SDP as they demanded state funding to proclaim “though we may disagree at times,” the city’s administrators “want what our members want: Appropriately staffed and resourced schools where children and communities are able to thrive.”

These comments came just days before the United States Attorney for eastern Pennsylvania filed charges against the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) for refusing to address rampant asbestos in its buildings.

On Monday night, PFT President Arthur Steinberg appeared alongside DC 33 President Greg Boulware, representatives of the Transport Workers Union 234, the bargaining representative for SEPTA’s workers, and other city locals to proclaim “solidarity with DC 33 until they win the contract they deserve!” Needless to say, no union executives signaled any intention to strike in unison to bring down Parker’s right-wing administration or secure the demands their members are asking for.

Instead of allowing their struggle to be hamstrung and sold out, city employees must form independent committees among fellow rank-and-file workers in order to take their struggle beyond their locals and into the working class where their strike already has a massive base of support and a basis for expanding their struggle.

Workers should have no confidence in their DC 33 leaders, who are seeking to use the strike to wear down their own members before presenting them with essentially the same offer as before, professing that it is the “best they can do” under the circumstances.

The circumstances are on the workers’ side, provided they draw the correct political conclusions and seek to take the conduct of their fight into their own hands through the formation of their own rank-and-file committees, committed to their struggle and to its expansion throughout the Philadelphia region and beyond.



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