

Philadelphia city workers strike: A sign of rising class struggle in the US

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The strike that began Tuesday by 9,000 municipal workers in Philadelphia, the sixth-largest city in the United States, is a significant sign of a growing movement in the working class with profound political implications for the US and the world.

Workers in Philadelphia are battling the devastating consequences of decades of austerity. The workers, who were offered an insulting 13 percent wage increase over four years by the mayor, are confronting the collapse of public services that have been slashed to the bone. The school district, where 14,000 teachers have also voted to strike, is facing a \$300 million deficit, and the city's transit agency is preparing a "doomsday" budget that would cut services in half.

Workers are rejecting with contempt the claim that there is "no money" for the vital services on which millions rely. In 2023, the Philadelphia metro area had a gross metropolitan product of \$557.6 billion and is home to 13 Fortune 500 corporate headquarters. The real issue is that the city's working class is being bled dry in the interests of corporate profit.

The ruling class is responding ruthlessly to the strike. Courts have already issued injunctions against picketing and ordered workers in certain departments back to work. Strikers report that the city is retaliating against those who refuse to cross picket lines. Mayor Cherelle Parker, a Democrat, has accused workers of "property vandalism," raising the specter of using police repression against the strike.

The strike, however, enjoys overwhelming support from city residents, despite efforts to turn public opinion against the workers. On social media, many are calling for the growing piles of garbage on city streets to be dumped in front of City Hall, expressing deep hostility toward the entire political establishment.

The Philadelphia strike reveals the real social force

capable of opposing the Trump administration: the working class. The Trump administration, with the support and complicity of the Democratic Party, is gutting education and public services as part of a wholesale assault on the working class. A bill now passing through Congress includes massive cuts in Medicaid, food assistance and other social programs, to pay for trillions in handouts to the rich.

The conditions facing workers in Philadelphia are repeated in city after city, state after state. Chicago is preparing its own "doomsday" transit budget and threatening to tear up the recently signed teachers' contract to impose further school cuts. That contract was rammed through with lies by the Chicago Teachers Union and the city government—both backed by the Democratic Socialists of America.

In New York City, the center of the world financial system, the transit agency is projecting multi-billion-dollar deficits, and the public schools face a \$350 million shortfall. Across California, school districts are reporting major deficits, and 77,000 teachers in all of the state's major cities are pushing for strike action. Last month, Los Angeles officials said they were preparing to declare a "fiscal emergency" and carry out mass layoffs.

The Trump administration, a government of the financial oligarchy, is overseeing a coordinated assault on the working class. In addition to the bill now being pushed through Congress, the White House is withholding nearly \$7 billion in educational funding to school districts across the country. This comes on top of mass firings of federal workers and the wholesale destruction of every social program and regulation that does not directly serve the profit interests of the rich.

The Democratic Party, however, is doing nothing to stop this attack. It has called no protests, because it

fears popular opposition to the capitalist system far more than it opposes Trump. The Democrats control the local governments in most major cities and are driving austerity at the local level. Moreover, a key factor of the budget shortfalls in Philadelphia and other cities is the expiration of supplemental pandemic funding under the Biden administration.

There is a vast and growing reservoir of social anger, and the strike in Philadelphia has the potential to serve as the spark for a powerful nationwide movement of the working class.

This is not a national issue alone. Across the globe, the same forces are at work. In Europe, what remains of the welfare state is being dismantled to fund massive military buildups. In Birmingham, Britain's second-largest city, sanitation workers have been on strike for more than 110 days against £300 million in threatened cuts to social services, which are being coordinated nationally by the Labour Party.

The strike, as with every struggle of workers, brings into sharp focus the role of the trade union apparatus. AFSCME District 33, the city worker union, did everything it could to prevent the strike in order to protect its ties to the Democratic Party. Now that the strike is underway, the union is stringing workers along on just \$200 a week in strike pay.

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, meanwhile, has responded to the teachers' vote to strike by joining hands with city officials to plead with the state government for funding—doing everything it can to defuse the situation and block a joint struggle.

These bureaucrats are terrified of the growing movement from below and are working overtime to sabotage it. Most unions boycotted the June 14 “No Kings” protests, and many are openly aligning themselves with Trump's reactionary “America First” agenda. They have collaborated in covering up the deaths of workers like autoworker Ronald Adams and two postal workers this summer, all of whom died under preventable conditions.

The WSWS calls on Philadelphia workers to form a rank-and-file strike committee to take control of the struggle out of the hands of the pro-management union bureaucracy. Such a committee should organize joint actions with other sections of the city's working class and appeal for the broadest possible support and unity with workers across the country.

Workers should demand a substantial increase in strike pay by drawing on AFSCME's \$300 million in assets—funded by workers' dues—and furloughing union officials who collect six-figure salaries while doing nothing to advance the struggle.

Every struggle of workers raises the necessity for independent organization—rank-and-file committees—through which workers can break the stranglehold of the union bureaucracy and assert democratic control over their fight.

These committees coordinate the collective strength of workers in every industry, linking struggles across workplaces, cities, and countries through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). This will lay the foundation for a broader counter-offensive of the working class, including the development of a general strike against war, austerity, and dictatorship.

The strike in Philadelphia carries powerful historical resonance. It began just three days before the July 4 Independence Day holiday, in Philadelphia—the original capital of the United States. On June 14, some 80,000 people marched through the city in the “No Kings” protest, part of the largest anti-government demonstrations in American history.

Just as the American colonists once rose up against the “long train of abuses” of King George III, the ground is being prepared today for a mass rebellion against the dictatorship of finance capital.

Class battles are emerging that will inevitably pose revolutionary questions. Even the defense of workers' already low standard of living is impossible without a frontal assault by the working class on the prerogatives of wealth. What is required is the expropriation of the oligarchy and a massive redistribution of its wealth, to the working class that created it.



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