

“We need universal solidarity”: Striking Philadelphia city workers denounce poverty pay, as Democratic mayor seeks injunction

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Philadelphia’s 9,000 municipal workers are currently on strike for a living wage and better work conditions. They are showing increasing determination even in the face of escalating government attacks.

The strike is already having a serious impact. The city administration of Democratic Mayor Cherelle Parker has opened 63 temporary garbage drop-off locations throughout the city in response to the strike. Streets have been flooded with overflowing mounds of trash only one day after the work stoppage. One resident summed up the situation with a post on social media: “60 dumpsters for 1.5 million people.”

The strike has won strong support from city residents. The workers, who are members of AFSCME District Council 33, are taking a stand against brutal austerity measures directed against the city’s working class population. The city’s transit system is also preparing a “doomsday” budget-cutting funding in half, while the school system has a \$300 million deficit.

The ruling class is bleeding the working class white to pay for Wall Street and war. Major cities across America are preparing massive cuts to fill similar funding shortfalls, while Congress is prepared to pass trillions in tax cuts for the wealthy. Chicago is preparing its own “doomsday” transit budget and massive cuts to the school district. Los Angeles, the country’s second-largest city, declared a “fiscal emergency” last week.

“We live in the US. We are under corporate rule wherever you are,” a striking librarian assistant told the WSWS. Other workers expressed the need for a general strike to bring down the Trump administration, declaring, “The government is for their own. The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. We are the ones working. They aren’t working. They spend on wars but don’t take care of their own.”

“Mayor Parker wants to cut healthcare. When she came in, the mayor gave herself a 9 percent raise and 30 percent to her staff on day one,” the worker added. “[But] she gave us 2 percent. What is that? We have never met inflation. But they are making more money for corporations. That sparked us.”

Other workers agreed, noting the daily hardships they endure. “For me, it is important that the union demand an end to the residency requirement for city workers,” said a mail operations

worker with over 10 years’ experience.

“The police, firefighters and prison workers are exempted from the requirement to live within the city. But we are paid less than them, and the city is expensive,” they said. “They have a headlock on us. We can’t buy a house outside the city.”

There is immense potential for broadening the strike. Around 14,000 teachers and other education professionals have also voted by an overwhelming 94 percent to authorize a strike. On Tuesday, the contract for around 3,000 of the city’s white collar workers in AFSCME District Council 47 also expired. However, the union is keeping them at work under a last-minute contract extension that expires on July 14.

The strike can only be won by going on the offensive, appealing for support and joint actions with workers across the city and the country. To prepare such actions, workers must take control of the strike out of the hands of the union bureaucrats by building rank-and-file committees. The officials are opposed to such a movement because it would cut across their cozy ties with the Democratic Party, which is carrying out the austerity measures alongside Republicans.

Courts issue anti-strike injunctions

The ruling class is responding ruthlessly. On Tuesday, in a flagrantly undemocratic decision, a Philadelphia Common Pleas Court judge on Tuesday granted the city an injunction against the workers, members of AFSCME District Council 33.

The order, issued by Judge Sierra Thomas-Street, requires 237 of the city’s 911 call center employees—including police and fire dispatchers and supervisors—to return to work immediately, citing a “clear and present danger” to public safety if emergency services remained understaffed. Essential Philadelphia Water Department workers were also ordered back to ensure the city’s supply of clean drinking water.

Claims by the city to be concerned with public welfare are utterly hypocritical. Sources have informed the *World Socialist*

Web Site that city officials had initially planned to hire untrained scabs to operate the city's water department before the injunction was issued. Such an action would have raised the possibility of a public health catastrophe. Moreover, their "essential" status is not reflected in adequate pay.

"We are the blue collar workers who I think are in a more strategic position to push hard," a striking librarian assistant told the WSW. "The Water Department workers are important and strong. We run a lot of the work that affects the basic infrastructure of the city, from libraries, to public swimming pools, to water—I heard the water filters are getting dirty—to sanitation. We need universal solidarity among workers."

Additionally, the injunction limits pickets to only 8 individuals per location and forces them away from building entrances after city officials claimed striking workers were obstructing city vehicles and engaging in minor vandalism. A worker was arrested for allegedly slashing a city vehicle's tire.

City officials continued to escalate their provocative rhetoric on Wednesday despite no evidence of incidents. These baseless claims of "violence" are being used to justify not only further injunctions but even deploying the police if necessary to break the strike.

Workers are on guard against more back-to-work orders. "[With] police dispatchers forced back to work after ONE day. I'm sure sanitation will be next in no time," posted one worker on social media.

A statement from a picket captain noted "seems like one of the next big targets they are going for is libraries. They want to force them open as cooling centers..." Workers have also reported being cited as "away without leave" after they had initially put in requests for vacation or time off in July.

AFSCME obeys injunctions

The situation calls for workers to answer these threats with an appeal to workers across the city and the country for a broadening of their struggle. Instead, AFSCME District Council 33 has been quiet about the legal assault on its members. For a day and a half, the union remained quiet, leaving its membership in the dark as its picket lines were being broken apart.

On Wednesday, DC 33 provided an update which accepted the city's line, advising members that "these legal directives are crucial and must be adhered to without exception to ensure compliance with the law and to avoid any potential legal repercussions."

As for plans to oppose the rulings, the union informed members, "We are scheduled to return to court in one week to contest the injunction's future." This would mean that striking workers will have their hands tied by the judge's order for

another week.

This is not simply cowardice but a conscious act to prevent the strike from having a further impact. No doubt top AFSCME officials privately welcome the injunction because it serves as a weapon to help them keep their own members in line.

Having failed to stop the strike, they are doing what they can to limit its impact and prevent it from spreading. DC 33 is also paying a woefully inadequate \$200 in weekly strike pay, even though the national AFSCME union has over \$300 million in net assets.

Workers are demanding at least an 8 percent annual pay increase over three years. But DC 33's negotiators are now only proposing 5 percent. The Philadelphia *Inquirer* noted that DC 33's wage demands would have meant only "about \$60 more a week." This suggests they are hoping to shut down the strike as soon as possible without meeting workers' demands, no doubt before the July 14 contract expiration date for the city's white collar workers.

The outcome of the Philadelphia municipal workers' strike will have far-reaching implications—not just for the city's 9,000 striking employees but for workers throughout the region and across the country.

The actions being taken by AFSCME to contain the struggle must be actively opposed. In every workplace, workers should begin organizing rank-and-file committees to coordinate information, oppose court injunctions and link up with other sections of the working class.

This is the only path forward for workers to fight, not only for immediate improvements but against the broader assault on the working class being carried out by both parties of big business.



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