

Philadelphia city workers defiant as strike continues through third day

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The strike by 9,000 Philadelphia municipal workers completed its third day yesterday, with a defiant mood among workers in the face of court injunctions and threats from the city's Democratic Party administration. The strike, the city's largest in decades, has won widespread public support while provoking fear and anger in the ruling class.

The workers, members of AFSCME District Council 33, are fighting against poverty pay, demanding a minimum of eight percent annual wage increases. Stagnant wages are bound up with a broader crisis in the city's funding, which is replicated in nearly every large city in the country. Philadelphia's school district has a \$300 million shortfall, while the SEPTA transit agency is preparing a "doomsday" budget to cut services by half.

"You cannot get by on thirty or forty thousand dollars a year. That is not even a living wage," one striker said. "The [days of 2 percent annual wage increases] are over. There is no rent control in Philadelphia. My rent went up eighty percent, from \$700 to \$1235 a month. My pay check does not pay the rent. But it is a bigger issue than just our situation. A lot of people are tired. I am going to continue to be hopeful. I would like to see us, all workers, come together. My work is like a sweatshop, but it takes knowledge. You have to be able to inform people about all the services people use."

"The Mayor gave herself a nine percent raise the first week," another worker said. "All politicians make promises and back peddle. Everybody must work together to overthrow Trump but that will take a collective effort from everyone."

There is enormous potential for the expansion of the strike across the city and the country. Recently, 14,000 Philadelphia educators voted to strike; their contract expires August 31. On Wednesday, workers at the Penn Museum, members of AFSCME District Council 47, voted unanimously to authorize strike action.

In a sign the strike is gaining public support, rapper LL Cool J announced yesterday that he would not perform as scheduled at the city's "Welcome America" July 4 festival if it meant crossing picket lines.

The contract for the city's 3,000 professional workers expired July 1, but AFSCME DC 47 agreed to a 14-day extension, blocking a joint struggle of blue and white collar municipal workers.

One DC 47 member who joined pickets in solidarity on Wednesday explained that the librarians were trying to stay out and not cross the picket line of the DC 33 library assistants and

guards. "We are asking questions of how we can work safely and that we would end up having to do the jobs of the striking workers who were not there. We need to expand the strike but DC 33 and 47 negotiations are not in sync, and people are not happy about that."

Meanwhile, the Democratic Party administration of Mayor Cherelle Parker is attempting to break the strike through court injunctions and slandering the picketers as vandals. In a speech yesterday, she appealed directly to workers to cross the picket line and return to work, cynically reminding them of double-time pay for working the July 4 holiday. No contract talks took place on Thursday.

Meanwhile, the Parker administration is trying to shut down the strike piecemeal using court injunctions. One injunction limited pickets to eight people per location, and ordered 911 operators and water department workers back to work. Yesterday, another injunction ordered 30 workers with the city's Medical Examiner's Office to go back to work, citing a supposed "backlog of bodies in storage."

The city has also set up around 60 trash drop-off centers across the city. One striker described conditions at these facilities to the WSWS as "extremely dangerous," as they are being set up and manned by scabs.

This escalation can only be responded to by an expansion of the strike. This must be organized through building rank-and-file strike committees in order to take control of the strike out of the hands of the union bureaucrats, who have intimate ties to the Democratic Party and who are working to isolate the strike.

In particular, rank-and-file committees should fight for an immediate increase to the inadequate \$200 in weekly strike pay, and for expanding the strike to include the city's white collar workers and transit workers. They should also appeal for support from city workers in other cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles and New York, where city governments are also preparing steep cuts.

By mobilizing the collective power of the working class, independent of the big business parties, city workers will be able to answer the attacks on the strike by organizing joint actions with other workers across Philadelphia and the country.

Industrial action has to be combined with a political movement of the working class against the strikebreaking injunctions and the Democratic political establishment, which is acting as the enforcers of the bipartisan austerity and the Trump administration.

The Democrats offered no serious opposition to the passage

yesterday in Congress of trillions of dollars in tax cuts and hundreds of billions slashed from Medicaid and other social programs. This is because, as the other party of American capitalism, they are terrified of a movement from below and committed to the ruthless defense of Wall Street, which, through the cuts, is trying to bleed workers white.

Defiant mood on the picket lines

Among workers there is a defiant response to the strikebreaking efforts of the city government. Numerous reports suggest strikers are either ignoring or skirting around the injunction limiting pickets to eight people. In several instances earlier this week, eight picketers were backed by anywhere from 10 to 40 or more strikers present but standing or sitting behind them.

A revealing episode took place in Northwest Philadelphia Wednesday, when dozens of workers rallied outside a garbage drop-off site, attempting to get residents to not undermine the strike by depositing their garbage. This led to a standoff with police, reported in detail by local public radio:

“At first, workers and law enforcement stood away from each other, having what appeared to be friendly conversations. The standoff lasted for hours, with some moments more tense than others.

“Then, a law enforcement officer with a sheriff’s badge handed out the court order and read it out loud to an increasingly rowdy crowd, who started shouting back, questioning their authority and sometimes swearing loudly.

“I understand your position, but we can’t let nobody in or out,” said one man who appeared to be a union striker but refused to identify himself.”

Workers also confronted the reporters, demanding to know whether they were “on their side.”

The attempts to enforce the picket lines are entirely justified and should be welcomed. This essential and basic element of a strike was once commonplace but largely disappeared in the United States over the past several decades as the union bureaucracy drew together with management and began actively helping to impose concessions and limit or neutralize strikes.

In fighting the injunction, workers are also defying the AFSCME bureaucracy, which issued a statement “imploring” workers to “strictly adhere” to the injunction, calling it not only a “legal obligation” but “essential to ensure the safety and integrity.” They described these cowardly instructions as “[upholding] principles of lawful protest and [demonstrating] our commitment to responsible activism.”

What they call “responsible actions” in fact weakens the strike and only encourages more attacks against workers. Throughout history, workers have always had to fight for their rights in the teeth of court injunctions, police lines and worse. American capitalism never gave up an inch without a fight.

While the bureaucrats did everything to try to avoid a strike, they are now trying to isolate and wear down workers. Yesterday,

workers reported that the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) has instructed its members to cross picket lines at work sites preparing for the city’s “Welcome America” Fourth of July events. IATSE allegedly justified this on the thin technicality that the pickets they cross were not official but set up in solidarity with the strikers.

Nevertheless, the fact that AFSCME has not organized actions at this major event, which draws people from across the region and has a significant impact on the local economy, is a sign of their efforts to isolate the strike and keep it from spreading.

AFSCME has done nothing to publicize the strike outside of Philadelphia. President Lee Saunders, until recently a member of the Democratic National Committee, has not issued a public statement, and the union does not even reference it on their website. The only acknowledgement of it on AFSCME’s national social media was a single repost of a press conference on its X/Twitter account.

Instead of raising strike pay so workers can dig in for a protracted fight, DC 33 is advertising loans from local credit unions on its Facebook page. Meanwhile, the District Council alone has \$27 million in assets and AFSCME’s national headquarters has more than \$300 million. All told, the American trade unions control tens of billions in assets, all paid for by workers’ dues money. Workers must demand these resources be deployed to support the strike, rather than financing six-figure salaries of top officials.

The strike, however, will not be decided on the picket lines alone, no matter how militant. The strike is part of a broader conflict emerging between the working class and the corporate oligarchy which controls the country. The fight of the city workers must be connected with a movement of the working class for socialism against capitalism, which is in terminal crisis and whose survival is possible only at the expense of the working class.



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