

In wake of mayor's 4th of July debacle

# AFSCME moves to end Philadelphia strike as soon as possible by dropping workers' demands

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As 9,000 Philadelphia city workers near the end of their first week on strike in the sixth largest city in America, there are increasing signs that the city government and the bureaucrats in AFSCME District Council 33 have become nervous about the growing support the strike has received.

On Friday, workers rallied throughout the city as their strike impacted the Welcome America Fourth of July festival. The event's concert finale was abruptly cut short when rapper LL Cool J and R&B singer Jazmine Sullivan both refused to perform, citing the ongoing strike as their reason.

"The show abruptly ended around 9 p.m. as DJ Hollywood left the stage in what became an awkward pre-fireworks interlude," wrote the Philadelphia *Inquirer* of what remained of the event after its headlining acts pulled out. As a result, "The already sparse audience scattered to get a better view of the fireworks, or to go home."

Philadelphia city workers--including librarians, water department and sanitation--have been on strike since July 1. They are demanding an increased wage as well as defense of overtime benefits and healthcare.

The city, run by Democratic mayor Cherelle Parker, is demanding workers take "fiscally responsible" poverty-level pay, consisting of about an 8 percent wage increase over three years. Blue collar city workers on average receive about \$46,000 a year, about \$15,000 lower than the city's median income. According to SmartAsset, it is half of what a comfortable living wage for the city is.

In addition, the city is demanding the workers give up the right to overtime pay on the weekend and other benefits.

There is powerful support for the strike both across the city and the country. Conditions are rapidly emerging to

make the strike the center of a broader working class offensive in defense of living conditions and public programs.

To activate this, workers must organize rank-and-file committees to link up with workers across the city and the country to prepare joint action on a national scale. The Philadelphia strike is taking a stand against brutal austerity, which is being imposed in every city in America through cuts to education, transit and other basic services, and at the federal level through multi-trillion-dollar tax cuts for the wealthy alongside hundreds of billions in cuts to Medicaid and other programs.

"The tide of public opinion from the citizens of Philadelphia has turned against the mayor," a striking city worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "I'm also seeing support towards DC 33 coming in from abroad and from all across the country as well." The worker said it "seems overwhelming to know they align themselves with our cause."

The movement in the working class against inequality must link up with the growing political opposition to Trump and his enablers in the Democratic Party. The outcome of this and other struggles will be determined not just by militancy on the picket lines, but to the degree that the working class emerges as the basic political force against oligarchy, dictatorship and war.

Workers must make a special appeal for public sector workers across Philadelphia to immediately join the strike. This includes 3,000 white collar employees whose contract expired on July 1, but, in a deliberate attempt to isolate them from their blue-collar co-workers, AFSCME extended the contract to July 14.

Workers at the Penn Museum have already voted to go

on strike if no deal emerges before then. These workers are affiliated with AFSCME District Council 47.

Additionally, 14,000 public school teachers have voted to strike at the end of next month if no contract is agreed to. Finally, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) currently faces a “doomsday” budget, consisting of massive cuts and service rollbacks affecting the entire region.

SEPTA workers voted last November to strike, but were denied that right when the Transport Workers Union Local 234 kept them at work, agreeing to a one-year extension contract with the city. That contract will expire in November.

But AFSCME DC 33, rather than press the advantage against the city government, has moved quickly to abandon its remaining demands in hopes of finding a quick “solution” to the impasse. The bureaucrats, who enjoy the closest ties with the Parker administration and the Democratic Party as a whole, are doing everything possible to prevent the outbreak of a broader movement that develops into a fight against the capitalist parties.

On Thursday, the union leadership stated that it had lowered its demand for a yearly 8 percent wage increase over three years to just 5 percent. This amounts to demanding just \$2,300 more a year than the Parker government is offering. The climb-down caused the *Inquirer* to remark that “the gap between their annual wage increase proposals had come down from 6 percentage points to just over 2 percentage points.”

The union has introduced these new lower proposals without any discussion with the membership. Workers contacted by the WSWS stated that they had learned of the union’s new 5 percent demand from the news. “I’m not too pleased with it, honestly speaking,” said one worker.

“What’s going on with talks? No updates? Why are you not informing us daily? Even if it’s to say we are still negotiating. Men and women on the front lines need to know,” said one worker on the DC 33 social media page. The union responded by lying that there was nothing to report.

The union has welcomed the city’s injunction on the strike, limiting the size of pickets and demanding essential workers cross the picket line. On Saturday, *Metro Philadelphia* reported that “police have been clearing the areas” around public libraries so that city librarians who have been refusing to cross the picket line can be sent back to work.

On Friday, DC 33 President Greg Boulware gave candid

comments to assembled reporters outside the Welcome America festival grounds. “We had a proposal with 44 talking points on it ... we have modified that down to essentially 15 pieces [in negotiations with the city],” he said. “The city has not budged on any of their proposal pieces at all.”

In other words, the union has sought to rapidly abandon all the demands its members are fighting for, seeking only for the government to make a minor compromise so it can disguise its betrayal of the membership.

AFSCME DC 33, just as much as the Parker government and the Democratic Party as a whole, fears a mass movement of the working population in Philadelphia and beyond. Such a movement could rapidly escape the narrow confines that the Democrats and their trade union partners have set and challenge the entire capitalist system.

The union continues to string its members out on miserly \$200-a-week strike payments, even as the union possesses assets of over \$27 million and AFSCME’s national office has assets amounting to \$300 million. On Sunday, the union social media page announced it would set up a payment option to accept donations from the public rather than spend its own money on the strike.

On Sunday, the *Inquirer* published comments given by former Pennsylvania congressman Robert Brady. Brady, who is now the chair of the Philadelphia Democratic Party, called on both sides to come to an understanding.

“It’s hot out there, the trash is collecting, and with the trash comes bugs and rats and roaches and all that kind of stuff,” Brady said. “I hope they can get this thing done, and I’m pretty optimistic after texting with Greg [Boulware].”

In spite of its power and support, the strike is in danger as long as control rests in the hands of AFSCME bureaucrats. Workers must move to take control themselves through the building of an independent rank-and-file strike committee.

This committee would give workers the power to override violations of the membership’s will, assert their right to control all negotiations—rather than having them conducted behind their backs—and break free from the bureaucratically imposed isolation of the strike.



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