

Philadelphia strike at the crossroads: Workers must form rank-and-file committees to take the offensive!

International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees
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As it enters its second week, the strike by 9,000 Philadelphia city workers has reached a crossroads. Whether the strike will be won or lost depends on the ability of rank-and-file workers to seize control from the union bureaucracy and take the offensive by mobilizing the working class across the city and the country.

The strike has already had a significant impact and has won broad public support. It turned the city's marquee July 4 celebration into a debacle for the Democratic Party administration of Mayor Cherelle Parker.

Attempts to turn public opinion against the strike have utterly failed. Parker's calls for "fiscally responsible" concessions have only provoked outrage among working class residents, who support the strike because they recognize that the city workers are fighting for them.

Workers are furious over the deepening assault on public services, including massive cuts to the school district—already hundreds of millions underfunded—and the transit system, where a "doomsday" budget threatens the permanent dismantling of essential infrastructure.

It is precisely at this moment, however, that the union is retreating from workers' demands. AFSCME District Council 33 has already lowered its wage proposal from 8 percent annual increases to just 5 percent. But workers cannot and must not accept this. Their wages are already far below what is needed to survive in a city with soaring costs for housing, food, transportation and healthcare.

While DC 33 workers were preparing to strike, AFSCME District Council 47 agreed to a two-week contract extension for the city's 3,000 white collar workers. This was not just inexcusable—it was an act of sabotage. The only conceivable purpose was to prevent a joint struggle and to isolate the DC 33 workers.

On Monday, AFSCME President Lee Saunders traveled

from Washington to deliver a press conference full of empty bluster. Saunders—until recently a member of the Democratic National Committee and chair of the AFL-CIO's Political Committee—personifies the corrupt nexus between the union bureaucracy and the pro-corporate Democratic Party that that the striking workers are fighting.

The Democrats were AWOL during last month's "No Kings" protests and rolled over on Trump's trillion-dollar cuts to Medicaid and other vital social programs—because they are the other party of Wall Street. In nearly every major city across the country, Democratic administrations are imposing similar "doomsday" austerity measures aimed at bleeding the working class dry to bankroll Wall Street and fund war.

The total arrogance Parker has shown toward the strike—slandering pickets as "vandals" and "violent"—mirrors the thuggish rhetoric of would-be dictator Donald Trump and lays bare the class character of the Democratic Party.

In reality, Saunders came to deliver marching orders to local union officials: shut down the strike quickly before it embarrasses the Democratic Party or, worse, sparks a broader fight against inequality and the entire political system. AFSCME is complicit in the media's information blackout, doing nothing to publicize the strike beyond the city, much less mobilize wider support.

At the rally, DC 33 President Greg Boulware told local media he was preparing to submit another proposal before talks resume Tuesday, but refused to reveal its contents. He said he wanted the city—i.e., not the workers—to see it first.

Workers should demand the full language of the proposal be published immediately. What else are the AFSCME bureaucrats preparing to give up behind their backs? Why should workers be the one to budge when they hold all of the initiative?

Not a single worker authorized any of this. At the moment when workers should be pressing their advantage, the union

bureaucrats are staging a retreat.

It must be said plainly: the strike is in danger as long as control remains in the hands of the AFSCME bureaucracy. Victory is possible—but only if workers take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands.

The IWA-RFC calls on workers to form a rank-and-file strike committee, made up exclusively of trusted workers, independent of and opposed to the union officials who are working to sabotage the strike.

All over the world, workers are building rank-and-file committees to fight back against the sabotage of the union bureaucracies. While the bureaucrats accept the “right” of corporations to make a profit, rank-and-file committees fight for the social rights of the working class. While bureaucrats begin from what the employer is willing to offer—or what it demands to take away—rank-and-file committees begin from what workers need.

While bureaucrats hold talks with management behind closed doors, rank-and-file committees fight for transparency and democratic control. While the bureaucrats isolate workers and string them out with contract extensions, rank-and-file committees fight to unify workers across industries, cities, and countries into a powerful, international movement of the working class.

A Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee will countermand decisions made by AFSCME officials that violate the will of the rank and file and prepare the ground for a new offensive.

To prepare for this new offensive, the IWA-RFC proposes that workers fight for:

- **Raise strike pay from \$200 to \$750 per week.** This is the most important strike in the country, and workers must be provided the resources to sustain it. The funds must come from the \$300 million in assets controlled by AFSCME and the tens of billions controlled by the AFL-CIO—resources paid for by workers’ dues. All non-essential union personnel, especially those receiving six-figure salaries, should be furloughed to redirect funds to the strike effort.

- **The expansion of the strike to include DC 47 workers and the city’s transit workers.** White collar workers must be brought into the fight, and Philadelphia teachers should actively join picket lines and prepare joint actions. The struggle must be broadened into a general fight for full funding of public services—schools, transit, sanitation—paid for by the city’s billionaires and the 13 Fortune 500 companies headquartered in Philadelphia.

- **Full rank-and-file control over bargaining.** No more secret negotiations. Elected workers’ representatives must be present at all talks, with the power to veto any proposal that violates workers’ demands. All bargaining sessions should be livestreamed. There must be no backtracking from

the original demand for 8 percent annual wage increases.

- **Make contact with workers in other cities where massive cuts are also being planned.** Workers must reach out to their counterparts in New York, Washington, Chicago, Los Angeles and other major cities where similar cuts are being prepared. Municipal workers, transit workers, teachers and others must form a network of rank-and-file committees to coordinate joint action in defense of jobs, wages, and vital public services.

The ruling elite will inevitably claim there is “no money” to meet the strikers’ demands. This is a lie. The money exists—but it is hoarded by Wall Street executives, financial oligarchs and major corporations. This wealth, created by workers in the first place, must be expropriated and used to meet the needs of society.

The strike in Philadelphia must become the spearhead of a broad working-class movement to challenge the so-called “right” of capitalists to profit, and fight for a massive redistribution of wealth in favor of the working class.

The conditions are emerging for a general strike movement that unites opposition to inequality with a political struggle against dictatorship and war. The rise of Trump, the growth of the immigration Gestapo, the launching of new wars, and the gutting of public services to pay for them all demonstrate that democracy is incompatible with capitalism. There is no “middle ground”—it is a conflict between irreconcilable class interests.

Ultimately, workers must prepare for a political struggle against capitalism, the root of all modern social ills. It must be replaced with socialism—the abolition of private ownership of industry, the end of fratricidal wars, and the reorganization of society’s resources to meet human needs, not private profit.



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