

[UPDATE] AFSCME announces sellout deal to shut down Philadelphia city workers strike: Workers must organize to override union's back to work order!

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Take matters out of the hands of the bureaucrats and organize to expand the strike! To build a rank-and-file strike committee, contact the WSWs below.

UPDATE: Early Wednesday morning, the city of Philadelphia and AFSCME District Council 33 announced a tentative agreement that fails to meet the key demands raised by municipal workers during their week-long strike.

According to news reports, the agreement provides municipal workers with three annual raises of 3 percent—far below even the union's earlier demand of 5 percent per year. The total is only one percentage point higher than the city's original offer of 8 percent over three years.

The city's demand for control of the healthcare plan was not included, but neither was the workers' demand for an increase in the city's contribution. The workers' demand that the city drop its requirement for employees to live inside the expensive city of Philadelphia was likewise abandoned by the union.

The strike was called off immediately, with DC 33 president Greg Boulware instructing workers to return to their jobs "as soon as they can get to work." Yet not even the union bureaucracy could publicly defend the agreement. "There's a deal that's been reached, unfortunately," Boulware said. "I'm not happy or satisfied with the outcome of things." But it was Boulware himself who signed off on the deal.

This development confirms the warnings made by the *World Socialist Web Site*, including in the article published below Tuesday night, that "the strike is in danger as long as control remains in the hands of the AFSCME bureaucracy."

While the city and the union officials have "approved" the deal, not a single worker has voted on it. Imposing a return to work without membership approval is a blatant violation of workers' democratic rights and the will of the rank and file.

Workers must immediately organize meetings and discussions today to override this sellout! The strike must continue under new leadership drawn from workers themselves, a rank-and-file strike committee excluding union officials.

Determination remains strong on the eighth day of the strike by 9,000 Philadelphia city workers. The workers, members of AFSCME District Council 33, are demanding livable wages and fighting massive cuts to local services which are being mirrored in every major city in America, spearheaded by the Democratic Party.

Among workers, there is an understanding that their fight is ultimately against the entire capitalist political establishment. Words like "aristocracy" and "oligarchy" were on workers' lips when they spoke

yesterday with WSWs reporters. "We cannot live under this government," one sanitation worker said. "I can't pay my bills, my mortgage. I have no savings. We do sanitation but the government keeps us down. It is all political."

One librarian assistant warned: "As a librarian, I need to know how to help people find the information they're looking for... But the truth begins to corrode under dictatorships."

A series of new and threatened injunctions, amid resumption of contract talks behind a wall of secrecy, suggests the city and AFSCME bureaucrats are moving to shut down the strike soon, without workers winning their demands.

It is urgent that workers take control of the strike out of the hands of the bureaucracy. A statement published Monday by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees calls on workers to form a rank-and-file strike committee: to demand an increase of strike pay to \$750 a week; to expand the strike to 3,000 white collar city workers, transit workers and teachers both in Philadelphia and across the country, and full transparency and workers' control over the bargaining process.

The IWA-RFC warned that "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 librarian assistant, upon first encountering WSWs reporters, exclaimed: "You're the socialists. I read your last article, and I agree, this strike needs to be expanded! Why doesn't AFSCME fight as one big union?"

AFSCME restarts talks behind workers' backs

The reason is that the AFSCME bureaucracy has close ties to the Democratic Party and is terrified that the strike could develop into a broader movement. This is why the negotiating team is deliberately squandering workers' initiative. The more powerful the impact of the strike, the more ground the bureaucrats give up.

Even before Tuesday's restart of talks, AFSCME DC 33 President Greg Boulware told the press that the union had a new proposal for the city, but refused to tell workers what it was. They had to find out from the corporate press.

According to the *Inquirer*, the union has walked back a proposal to allow workers with five years seniority to live outside the city limits,

where the cost of living is lower. Because Democratic Mayor Cherelle Parker has rejected this as a “nonstarter,” they are now proposing that this be applied only to those with 10 years seniority. AFSCME has already abandoned workers’ original demand for an 8 percent annual wage increase.

“I am not happy that the union demand is now 5 percent, down from 8 percent. We already had 5 percent in last year’s contract extension,” a sanitation worker said. “The union has a new proposal but I did not see it.”

Another worker said: “They’re [the union and the City] in a back room fighting over intricacies that don’t amount to anything, while people out here in the 92-degree (33 degrees Celsius) heat need things like medicine. I know a colleague on the picket line who needs chemo; I need over \$250.00 a month to pay for my medications; but the city cut those benefits when we went on strike.”

One striker who works for the city’s 311 call center said: “We want to get a living wage because the average housing cost is like \$1,800 a month ... rent is eating up almost half of [our average salary of \$46,000].”

“A car and gas are out of my budget. I have to take public transportation but now they plan to cut SEPTA service and charge more. What I saw the union asking for before was 8 percent increase for 2025, 26, and 27, just for wages. But inflation is 3 percent each year. We need to be getting up to speed to make up for the past four years.”

More injunctions against the strike

Meanwhile, a court granted the city yet another injunction, ordering airport dispatchers back on the job. Earlier injunctions ordered back emergency dispatchers and water department workers.

The city government is also reportedly considering filing for an injunction for even more stringent restrictions on picketing, accusing workers of “very serious picket line misconduct,” continuing the city’s slander of the strikers as violent vandals. There are also suggestions that some sanitation workers may be ordered back to work, as garbage continues to pile up on the city’s streets.

The situation calls for an all-out fight against this “government by injunction.” But Boulware shrugged his shoulders when asked by the press yesterday, saying the back to work order “Just shows how important our men and women are.” When asked about potential new injunctions against pickets, he replied, after a lengthy pause: “I don’t know if I have a response to that ... we’ll let the court decide that issue.”

AFSCME officials no doubt welcome the injunctions *because* they help keep workers on a leash. The bureaucracy is also wearing workers down on a miserly \$200 a week in strike pay. “They [AFSCME] didn’t even supply us with a porta-potty,” one worker added. “We gotta drive about a half a mile to the Shop-Rite to use their bathroom!”

The worker concluded: “The union hasn’t called a strike in 40 years. If they settle for less than inflation wages, then we’re back to where we’ve been for 40 years!”

Support for a general strike

There is immense support in the working class for broadening the strike. Yesterday, AFSCME DC 47 was compelled to announce a strike vote for 3,000 white-collar city workers, who had been strung out on a sudden two-week extension which prevented them from walking out with DC 33

members on July 1. But the union is stalling as much as possible, with the vote not even scheduled until Thursday, July 10.

“My co-workers were asking which workers were in DC 47 and not on strike?” one striking worker said. “A general strike could be more powerful. SEPTA [the city’s transit agency] and state workers out together with us would be more powerful. We have to fight Trump’s budget—all those people who will lose their medical.”

There is also support among the school’s public teachers, who are fighting massive cuts. On Tuesday, the *Inquirer* newspaper carried a report that the Philadelphia school district is close to announcing plans to shutter schools in order to close a \$300 million deficit. The report included a first hand account of a session of an advisory panel discussing school closures. A subhead in the article asks: “Which schools would you close?”

For the city’s teachers and working class, the answer is “none.” 14,000 teachers voted by 95 percent last month to authorize a strike when their contract expires on August 31. But there is immense potential now to make the municipal workers’ strike a line in the sand, demanding full funding for schools and transit and decent pay for public sector workers, paid for by the city’s billionaires and Fortune 500 companies.

The role of the Democrats

The role of Parker and the Democratic Party in trying to break the strike is further proof that the fight against dictatorship, personified by Trump, requires a break from the Democrats and a fight against the whole political system. Their response to the strike, using the police and the courts against workers while slandering the strike, is in all essentials the same way Trump is dealing with opposition.

While Republicans take the lead in slashing Medicaid and taxes for the wealthy at the federal level, with no meaningful opposition, the Democrats are slashing city budgets across the country at the local level. Both parties defend inequality and the capitalist ruling class which lies behind the cuts. Workers are being bled white to keep the stock market up and to pay for new and unpopular wars.

AFSCME President Lee Saunders was, until recently, a member of the Democratic National Committee. His visit at the start of the week was to give local officials their marching orders to end the strike as soon as possible.

While making empty statements that the national union “has workers’ backs,” the reality is that AFSCME’s website does not even mention what is happening in Philadelphia.

The role of pseudo-left groups like the Democratic Socialists of America, which has two members on the City Council, is to bolster the bureaucracy and help keep things under control. It is sending its members to the picket lines to reinforce the bureaucracy’s control over the workers.

In a recent Instagram post, the DSA’s Philadelphia chapter admonished members not to raise any serious political issues. “This is about the workers ... follow the workers and match their energy ... Follow the union rep and/or strike captain [sic] instructions.” Engage workers in small talk, they say, and “don’t make it feel like you’re just recruiting.” On any clothing with political slogans, “if it’ll start an argument [i.e., upset the bureaucrats], maybe leave it at home.”

Meanwhile, the DSA is joining in the information blackout. *Jacobin*, the DSA’s de facto house organ, finally published its first article on the strike on Tuesday, eight days into the strike (it had previously posted one article by *Labor Notes*, another pseudo-left group with high-level connections to the union bureaucracy). The article does not even mention the word “Democrat.”

“I hate both sides of the political establishment, Democrats and Republicans,” one striker told the WSWS. “The Democrats are [collaborators with Trump]. I agree that the union bureaucracy is the Democrats. The current mayor, when she was running for office, had part of the sanitation workers backing her, with the ‘Cleaner, Greener’ campaign. [But] when the Democrat Party is in power, they don’t do anything. And then when the Republicans are in, they undo the little we get. In my view, why are we not all striking now to bring the entire state to its knees?”



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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