

Philadelphia city workers outraged over strike's end as tentative deal paves way for major healthcare cuts

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Philadelphia workers: Tell us what you think about the contract by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Philadelphia city workers are outraged after AFSCME District Council 33 abruptly shut down their powerful eight-day strike. The tentative agreement, announced in the dead of night, meets none of the workers' core demands and amounts to a deliberate act of sabotage by the union bureaucracy.

The new contract includes a paltry 9 percent wage increase spread over three years—just one percent more than the city's initial offer, which so outraged workers that they had authorized strike action in the first place.

"Folded like a lawn chair smh," one worker said in a comment on the union's Facebook page that was later removed by administrators. Another said: "We did all this for an extra 37 dollars a check! This union is a joke! We missed damn near 2 weeks of pay for absolutely nothing! Smfh, stand for something or fall for anything."

In response, a group of workers formed the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee on Wednesday afternoon. In its founding statement, the committee called for workers to reject the agreement. "The strike must be renewed immediately, and expanded to include transit workers, white-collar employees and all other sections of the working class in Philadelphia."

The statement continued: "The union officials will try to tell you that nothing more can be done—that the city won't budge, and that in any case we have to accept the deal because the strike is over. We reject this completely. What is over is the period where these corrupt officials were allowed to lead us into one dead end after another." It called for workers to join the committee to "give us real power over our own struggle, break through the isolation and lies, and build a powerful movement uniting us with workers across Philadelphia and throughout the United States."

Support remains high for an expanded struggle. "Maybe all minimum wage workers should go on strike so we can get more money," one worker suggested in a Facebook comment. "A strike like that would shut down the city in just two days."

Another worker told the WSW: "I'm totally with going back out there and going on strike so we can get exactly what we were out there sweating for in that dangerous heat. We actually came together as one in protest. That was great! ... I am one of those people who's ready to sweat again for what's right!"

Not even AFSCME DC 33 attempted to defend its decision to members. In a bizarre, self-contradictory statement reflecting fear of rank-and-file anger, union president Greg Boulware declared: "There's a deal that's been reached, unfortunately. I'm not happy or satisfied with the outcome of things." But as one worker observed: "How does the president come out acting like he was disappointed in the deal, but he's the one who accepted it? I'm confused."

Boulware added, "We felt our clock was running out." In reality, the strike was gaining strength and was more powerful than ever. What he really meant was that the union bureaucracy had to shut it down before it slipped out of their control.

This is because on Thursday, 3,000 white-collar city workers in District Council 47 are set to authorize strike action that could begin as early as next Monday. AFSCME had deliberately isolated these workers from the initial walkout by agreeing to a 14-day contract extension.

The last thing the bureaucracy wanted was for the strike to escalate into a direct confrontation with the Democratic Party and the political establishment—exactly where it was heading. "They got scared about the City Hall [rally] today, half the city was [going to] pull up," one worker commented on Facebook.

Another worker told the WSW: "In my opinion, 47 leadership should have truly made preparations to stand with us from the beginning, and our overall efforts were weaker because of it (and it was most likely intentional). Our strike was not properly organized from day one, and it continued to not be cohesive throughout the entire time, at least from the places I picketed at."

Workers speak out

“I’ll be reading over the contract the union closed on later today but, based on the 3 percent deal we took, I’m not hopeful.”

Another worker described AFSCME’s conduct of the strike:

The union leadership was not the ones to convey to me we were on strike. I was given the information through someone else. When it was decided, there should have been a mass email, text or voice mail. They have every member’s contact information.

[During the strike] I was wondering what’s happening during negotiations and finding out from other sources throughout the day, before the leadership confirms.”

The worker added that, on the picket line, “[we were] being told we will not be letting anyone in the building. But then later, we were told to corral people to other entrances instead. Then, later still, we were told that we are just letting people in.

Before we went on strike, we were told they will have another option for our elderly members, but that must not have panned out in time because we had people with mobility aids in the excessive heat every day. Picketing members were supposed to be provided lunch each day, but there were many times our group was being fed by people outside of the union. On the 4th, when the [Municipal Services Building] was closed, we should have been given other picketing locations to go to, but we weren’t.

Even now, he said, “Even though leadership has every picketing member’s up-to-date information, I don’t know when the vote will be ... We had such a large majority that voted to strike. The members were ready, and I’m hoping we carry that energy into voting ‘no’ on the tentative agreement.”

More concessions revealed

A full copy of the five-page tentative agreement, released later on Wednesday, revealed even deeper concessions to the city—particularly on healthcare. Remarkably, the deal eliminates all city contributions to the workers’ Health and Welfare Fund from July 1 to August 3. With the standard monthly contribution at roughly \$1,500 per worker, this amounts to a \$13.5 million cut to healthcare funding.

Afterward, the city will resume contributions at the previous

rate. Any potential increase is deferred until 2027 or 2028 and depends on a “Third Party Consultant” jointly selected by the city and AFSCME, who must determine that the fund’s reserves have fallen below a critical threshold. If no agreement on a consultant is reached by next year, the city will select one unilaterally.

On the city’s previous missed payments to the fund, the contract only calls for the union and the city to “work together to resolve any disputes.”

Worst of all, the contract paves the way for future healthcare and benefit cuts. Section 7e states: “DC 33, in conjunction with the City of Philadelphia, will agree to work in good faith to identify cost containment strategies as a means to manage the cost of healthcare programs offered to employees.”

The paragraph that follows authorizes a third-party audit “to confirm the eligibility of covered employees and their dependents”—in other words, to remove workers and their families from the healthcare plan.

The new details confirm the conclusion drawn by the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee:

... a different leadership is needed. That is the purpose of the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. The outcome of this strike will not be determined by what is signed behind closed doors, but by what workers do now. The way forward is not retreat—but a new offensive.



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