

Sabotage of Philadelphia strike shows need for rank-and-file rebellion against union apparatus

Tom Hall
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*The Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee is calling all city workers, union members, and supporters to a public online meeting at 7 p.m. Eastern Time on Monday, July 14. **Register for the meeting here.***

AFSCME's betrayal of the eight-day Philadelphia city workers' strike once again exposes the union bureaucracy as an industrial police force for capitalism and its two political parties. It confirms an iron rule, with no exceptions: So long as workers remain under control of the apparatus, the only possible outcome is a sellout.

The strike was a powerful expression of growing social opposition, pointing to an emerging confrontation between the working class and the Trump administration, which governs in the interests of the corporate oligarchy. It also demonstrated that building this movement is inseparable from the fight to overthrow the corrupt union apparatus and return control to the rank and file, where it belongs.

An important step forward in this was taken Wednesday by the founding of the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee, which calls on workers to reject the agreement, "override the decision to end the strike, which was taken in direct violation of the clear will of the rank and file and without any vote" and renew the strike "immediately ... expanded to include transit workers, white-collar employees and all other sections of the working class in Philadelphia."

The "agreement" to end the strike is a complete betrayal. It includes a mere 9 percent wage increase over three years—just one percentage point higher than Democratic Mayor Cherelle Parker's initial offer. It makes no change to the residency requirement, forcing workers to remain in a city with a significantly higher cost of living. Worst of all, it paves the way for major cuts to

welfare and healthcare funding, allowing the city to skip an estimated \$13.5 million in payments to the health fund and committing AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees) to collaborate on cost-cutting measures.

The AFSCME bureaucracy shut down the strike in the middle of the night precisely because the strike was gaining momentum and strength. It had widespread support among the city's working class, while uncollected garbage continued to pile up in the streets. The strike disrupted the city's July 4 concert after top performers refused to cross the picket line. And on Thursday, 3,000 white-collar workers were set to vote on strike action, threatening AFSCME's efforts to block a united struggle.

AFSCME is not even attempting to justify its position, but is instead trying to sow an atmosphere of defeat and frustration. District Council 33 President Greg Boulware told the press he ended the strike because "we felt our clock was running out."

By "we," Boulware means the bureaucracy, which was running out of time to prevent the strike from spreading to white-collar workers and other sections of the working class. Throughout the strike, Mayor Parker slandered workers as "vandals," used the courts to force sections of the strike back to work and deployed police to the picket lines. As the strike continued, conditions were emerging for workers to defy injunctions, pitting them in direct conflict with the Democratic Party.

AFSCME President Lee Saunders—whose annual income is \$400,000 and who was until recently a member of the Democratic National Committee—came to Philadelphia on Monday to deliver marching orders to the local union officials. His widely publicized resignation from the DNC last month—alongside American Federation

of Teachers President Randi Weingarten—was presented as a protest over the party’s refusal to allow younger, more left-leaning candidates to run in the primaries.

But Saunders’ role in sabotaging the Philadelphia strike makes clear that his central concern is how to contain and suppress the growing and entirely justified anger toward the Democratic Party, a party of Wall Street and imperialism.

The struggle in Philadelphia is taking place amidst a bipartisan social counter-revolution. At the federal level, Trump and the Republicans passed historic cuts to Medicaid and other social programs to partially fund trillions of dollars in tax cuts. The Democrats put up no real fight in Congress because they support the basic aim of his “Big Beautiful Bill.”

In Philadelphia and every major city across America, the Democrats are preparing massive cuts to school systems, transit networks and other core functions which go far beyond another round of austerity. They represent the permanent dismantling of social infrastructure on which millions of workers rely.

The working class is being bled white because American capitalism, wracked by terminal crisis, is lashing out to find new sources of wealth, which can only come through robbery and violence on a massive scale. The lurch towards dictatorship expressed by Trump, and the expanding drive towards World War III, are the inevitable political expressions of this process.

The conditions for a mass eruption of working class struggle are not only ripe, they are overripe. In the midst of the greatest attacks on the working class in living memory, however, the apparatus of the unions has only called 19 major strikes so far this year—that is, only when they did not think they could block a struggle outright.

Every struggle raises the imperative for new, independent organizations of working class power. That is the purpose of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

In initiating the IWA-RFC in 2021, the International Committee of the Fourth International wrote, “New forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale” are needed. “The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress every expression of resistance.”

This necessity has been confirmed time and again: in the 2021 Volvo Trucks strike, where workers repeatedly rejected a contract only to have it rammed through by the

UAW; in the teachers’ struggles during the pandemic, where unions forced teachers back to unsafe classrooms; in the 2022 railroad contract fight, where the unions blocked a strike and allowed Congress to force through a contract that workers had rejected; in the 2023 UPS deal, hailed as a “victory” by the Teamsters while setting the stage for mass layoffs; and in countless other betrayals across every industry.

The union apparatus functions not to unite workers, but to divide them; not to mobilize struggle, but to suppress it. Comprised of highly-paid functionaries tied to the state and corporations, it exists to enforce labor discipline on behalf of capital.

The experience of UAW President Shawn Fain exposes the bankruptcy of all those who claim that the apparatus can be reformed. Fain’s much-hyped “stand-up strike” was a fraud, designed to prevent a real fight against the auto companies. It was followed by mass layoffs. Fain has since embraced Trump’s nationalist trade war agenda and was recently exposed as a corrupt thug in the latest report from the UAW Monitor.

The Philadelphia betrayal must be carefully studied. It provides a strategic experience in the necessity for a rank-and-file rebellion against the apparatus. That rebellion begins with the formation of independent organizations of struggle, controlled by the workers themselves.

The struggle in Philadelphia is far from over, and the establishment of the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee points the way forward. Rank-and-file workers must insist that they have the sole right to decide the course of their struggle, not unaccountable officials earning six-figure salaries.

The same basic issue confronts every section of the working class, in every industry and in every country. The IWA-RFC calls on workers to build rank-and-file committees in workplaces across the US and internationally, to link up their struggles and prepare a unified counteroffensive against the financial oligarchy and all of its political servants.



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