

Scabbing operation by Philadelphia union apparatus on city workers strike comes into focus

Tom Hall
11 July 2025

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.

Voting is scheduled to start Monday on a tentative agreement for 9,000 Philadelphia city workers, following the shutdown of their strike in the early morning this past Wednesday. The end of the strike by AFSCME District Council 33 was an act of deliberate sabotage, at a time when the strike was at its most powerful, with none of workers' demands being achieved.

A key factor in the Wednesday betrayal was the strike vote beginning the following day, Thursday, for 3,000 white collar city workers in AFSCME DC 47. Their contract originally expired the same day as the blue collar workers in DC 33, but the union imposed a last-minute, two-week extension in order to isolate them.

This was the meaning of DC 33 President Greg Boulware's statement that the union ended the strike because "we felt our clock was running out." The bureaucracy wanted to shut the strike down before it broadened into a class movement against inequality and the Democratic Party, which the bureaucracy is a part of.

Workers are furious about the betrayal. "[DC] 47 members have been left in the dark for months, never heard about the 2 week extension, and forced to cross a picket line when we should have been out there with 33," one worker wrote on social media. As of this writing, there has been no update on the DC 47 strike vote, and there is no reference to it on the union's social media pages or its website.

The most organized expression of opposition is the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee, founded last Wednesday against AFSCME's betrayal. "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 Committee wrote in a statement.

How the city's unions scabbed on the strike

The sellout of the strike is so naked and blatant that even the corporate press, which usually ignores such matters out of self-interest, has been forced to take note. The Philadelphia *Inquirer* newspaper, which hailed the deal as a win for "fiscal discipline," ran a story Thursday carrying the headline: "How the AFSCME DC 33 strike exposed fault lines in Philly's labor movement."

During the strike, the article states, "Philadelphia unions found themselves in the difficult position of having to choose between supporting the roughly 9,000 blue-collar municipal workers on strike and maintaining relationships with their employer, Mayor Cherelle L. Parker."

The *Inquirer* lays out in detail how the other city unions scabbed on the strike throughout. A major flashpoint was the city's "Welcome America" July 4 festival, where the laborers and building and construction trades unions worked to set up the grounds. The *Inquirer* also noted evidence that the IATSE film and stage workers' union had its members work on the event.

"Welcome America" proved to be a debacle, but only due to the pullout of rapper LL Cool J and singer Jazmine Sullivan, who refused to cross picket lines to perform. The union bureaucrats, however, had no such qualms about ordering workers to cross.

The newspaper cites empty statements from one union after another. SEIU 32BJ declared it "[stands] with

AFSCME DC 33 public sector workers,” the paper quotes it as saying. The *Inquirer* then adds: “But Local 32BJ leaders conspicuously declined to comment during the walkout.”

Asked for comment by the *Inquirer*, Philadelphia Federation of Teachers president Arthur Steinberg denounced scabbing as “deplorable, traitorous conduct.” But he did nothing to mobilize the city’s 14,000 public school teachers who have voted overwhelmingly to strike. If not for the summer vacation, there can be little doubt that the PFT bureaucracy would have ordered its members to cross the picket line too.

The article leads with an empty statement from 2022 by David Bauder, head of the city’s AFL-CIO council, calling on “unity” in the “labor movement.” But when asked by the newspaper about the strike, he responded evasively: “If there’s a need for conversations after everything is settled and the smoke clears, we’ll have them.”

The *Inquirer* presents the “fault line” as being between different unions in the city of Philadelphia. In reality, it is between the union bureaucracy and the workers.

The role of the apparatus during the strike was standard practice. In every strike that the bureaucracy is not able to prevent, it does everything it can to isolate, limit and shut down the struggle as soon as it can. To cite only some recent examples: the 2023 “standup strike” in the auto industry; the three-day strike by east coast longshoremen last year; the Colorado grocery workers strikes this year, where the same union local kept King Soopers and Safeway workers separated from each other; and recent strikes by nursing home workers and submarine builders in Connecticut.

Between January and June of this year, only 18 major strikes (defined as involving more than 1,000 workers) were called in the United States, a slight increase from 10 at the same time last year. This is in spite of the fact that the country is in the midst of an active conspiracy to establish a dictatorship and trillions of dollars are being drained from workers through historic budget cuts.

The unions and the Democratic Party

The strike is the latest confirmation of the bureaucracy’s role as strikebreakers and industrial police. They are doing everything possible to turn back the

growing movement against capitalism, in which the Democrats are increasingly discredited for their role in enabling Trump and helping slash budgets and attack demonstrations.

The Philadelphia unions’ support for Mayor Parker deserves further comment. According to the *Inquirer*, her victory in the 2023 Democratic primary was due to the endorsement of union officials and turnout from black and Latino voters. “She appealed to voters through a personal story of Philly grit, a tough posture on crime, and a more moderate ideology than some of her top rivals,” the paper wrote at the time.

It also noted that Parker’s vote total in the primary was the lowest in modern history.

This expresses the social character of the Democrats as a party of the ruling class. Having long ago abandoned any pretense of New Deal “reform,” it has spent recent decades appealing to race and other forms of personal identity. The union bureaucracy, whose allegiance to the Democrats has not been altered in the slightest by its generations of right-wing policies, plays a major role in funding and staffing its election campaigns, alongside considerable financial support from corporate backers.

But this is now reaching its limit. “This strike has taught me one thing,” one worker observed. “I’m out of the habit of voting for someone just because they are ‘black.’ These same black politicians or ones in power whether man or woman … are just as corrupt and fucked up as the so-called ‘white man’ that’s allegedly ‘holding us back.’”

The conclusion that must be drawn above all is that the working class must establish its political independence, through a fight against both the Democrats and the union bureaucracy. Such a rebellion is necessary to prepare for a broader, unified conflict against the entire political and social setup which challenges the social power of the financial oligarchy.



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