

# Union seeks to shut down Philadelphia-wide strike movement as rank-and-file resists

**Our reporters**  
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*For a renewed strike under workers' control, not bureaucrats! Join the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee by filling out the form below.*

Philadelphia's Democratic mayor, Cherelle Parker, announced a sellout tentative agreement Tuesday morning for 3,000 white-collar municipal workers in AFSCME District Council 47.

The agreement is aimed at blocking a growing rank-and-file rebellion and preventing the resurgence of a powerful citywide strike movement. It comes just as white-collar workers near the end of a strike authorization vote, following AFSCME's shutdown of an earlier strike by 9,000 blue-collar workers in District Council 33.

DC 33 members are voting this week on their own tentative agreement, which meets none of their demands and was sprung on workers just as their strike had reached its strongest point. The AFSCME bureaucracy clearly sought to prevent a scenario in which a resounding strike vote by white-collar workers would inspire blue-collar workers to overwhelmingly reject their own contract—setting the stage for a renewed, unified strike of all municipal workers in the city.

Meanwhile, the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee held an online public meeting Monday evening, bringing together city workers and supporters from across Philadelphia and the country. Around 120 people registered for the event, which focused on the committee's call to resume the strike under rank-and-file control as part of a broader working-class movement against austerity and poverty wages.

The DC 47 agreement includes a paltry 13.5 percent wage increase over four years, with 4.4 percent applied retroactively to last year—when workers were under a one-year contract extension. That leaves just 9.1 percent over the next three years, a mere one-tenth of a percent higher than the deal for DC 33.

Just two days ago, the union publicly denounced the city's original offer of 8 percent over three years as “unacceptable.” But such statements were always for public consumption. DC 33 officials made similar noises—only to turn around and endorse virtually the same agreement.

Parker herself revealed the real relationship between the union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party in an interview with the *Philadelphia Inquirer* last weekend. “I am [the union],” she declared. “[The union] is me.”

In a promotional video on social media, AFSCME officials boasted that workers “love it.” The actual response from workers has been furious. “13.5 percent over four years is horrible,” one worker wrote on Facebook. “Sell outs,” exclaimed another. “I’m surprised the comments are still on!” another observed. “How irritating is it that we hear about it from the boss [Parker] before our elected union leaders?”

a fourth asked.

Another worker pointed out the deal is in fact a pay cut: “[Inflation] data just out is predicting 2.8 percent ... never mind that we still haven’t made up the pay cut [under Michael Nutter, mayor between 2008 and 2016]. Three percent is not enough for any of us, regardless of the color of our collars.”

## Rank-and-File Committee responds

On Tuesday night, the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee issued the following statement:

The Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee calls on all members of AFSCME District Council 47 to overwhelmingly reject the sham “tentative agreement” reached behind closed doors between union officials and the City of Philadelphia. This sellout proves what we have warned all along: the AFSCME leadership, both local and national, is actively working to sabotage the strike movement of public sector workers.

Philadelphia workers must wage a new and expanded strike that is entirely under our control, not AFSCME officials engaged in a conspiracy against us.

The timing of this agreement is no accident. It was announced just hours after members voted on strike authorization and right before DC 33 members cast votes on their own rotten tentative agreement. AFSCME did this out of fear, not of the city administration, but of its own members. They couldn’t risk a “yes” vote to strike by DC 47, which would have inspired DC 33 workers to vote down their own deal and join the fight. This was a deliberate act to isolate workers, fragment resistance, and head off a broader movement.

Neither the DC 47 nor DC 33 agreements meet the basic demands raised by workers—on wages, cost-of-living, staffing, and working conditions. DC 47 leaders didn’t even communicate the terms of the TA to the membership. It was the mayor who let the cat out of the bag—bragging about wage “increases” on social media while union officials stayed silent. This shows who they really serve: not workers, but the politicians and their austerity agendas.

These tentative agreements, like the court injunctions against the DC 33 strike, are tools of suppression, strikebreaking orders dressed up as compromises.

But the fight is not over. Voting down the TAs is only the first step. This moment has proven the necessity of the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee. We have been vindicated in our warnings, and now we must expand. We call on all city workers—DC 47, DC 33, and beyond—to join and build this committee, to build a strike that is organized, led, and controlled entirely by the rank and file.

No more backdoor deals! No more betrayals! A strike must be built from below, with power in the hands of the workers themselves.

## Workers discuss way forward

The need to renew the strike under the democratic control of workers, and on the basis of a new political strategy rooted in the unity of the entire working class, was the focus of Monday night's public meeting organized by the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee.

In the opening report, WSWs reporter Nick Barrickman said, "The fight in Philadelphia is part of a nationwide assault on public workers and services." He cited the looming budget crises in Chicago, where officials are threatening "doomsday" cuts to public transit and education, and in Los Angeles where the city has declared a "fiscal emergency."

"This crisis," he continued, "is the direct result of policies designed to serve the interests of the capitalist ruling class ... At the federal level, Trump's 'big, beautiful bill' has slashed funding for vital social programs like Medicaid and Medicare, while delivering tax cuts to the wealthy and boosting military and police spending."

Barrickman concluded: "The Philadelphia strike, therefore, is not just a local dispute, but part of a national and international fight against budget cuts, privatization, and the domination of society by a tiny elite."

A Philadelphia city worker and member of the strike committee reflected on the historical significance of the moment: "I hear stories from the 1986 strike with Mayor Wilson Goode, and 39 years later, history repeats itself. As opposed to the 1986 strike, I don't think much was accomplished with this one. It seemed almost like an inside job, sabotage from the DC 33 leadership."

"In retrospect, we set out to accomplish something not just within Philadelphia but internationally, with many people watching," he said. "I believe you have to take a stand for what you believe in. Philadelphia city governments, or any government, whether Democratic or Republican, do not seem to have the best interests of U.S. citizens in mind, especially their financial well-being."

Another member of the committee added: "Nobody vocal is happy about the [DC 33] tentative agreement." She pointed out that the proposed wages were "not enough for those considered truly essential workers, such as water, sanitation, garbage men, and [Department of Human Services] workers."

She criticized the way the strike was conducted: "The strike was not organized for success." Vulnerable workers were exposed to extreme heat without precautions. "Days when buildings were closed should

have been used to mobilize workers to more sparsely staffed pickets or locations needing a morale boost." She also condemned the lack of transparency: "It is the leadership's job to provide updates on what was lost and gained after every negotiation session, but workers didn't get that."

A Philadelphia educator also spoke, supporting the city workers and denouncing the silence of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. While 14,000 teachers voted last month to authorize a strike, the city workers' struggle is "not being talked about by any union leadership voices, or media voices other than ours ... [This] is abhorrent to me. It sounds like a purposeful silence that attempts to hide a gigantic potential of workers here in Philadelphia."

A retired New York City teacher added that the corporate media was enforcing a blackout. "The *New York Times*... didn't write a single word about this strike," he said. "Although they have reporters all over the world, they refused to cover a major strike taking place less than two hours from New York." He called the *Times* "the leading mouthpiece for the Democratic Party," whose silence revealed the role of that party in suppressing the opposition from below.

A postal worker from Pennsylvania also spoke, connecting the struggle of Philadelphia city workers with the fight by postal workers against privatization and unsafe working conditions. He recalled the deaths of two carriers from apparent heat-related injuries and said, "You can't believe in the union." He concluded: "I say that people in Philadelphia should all vote no ... I say, go strike again!"

In concluding remarks, WSWs reporter Tom Hall said, "What happened in Philadelphia is not a sort of exceptional issue. But these are the burning questions which the entire working class is facing."

The strategy of the union bureaucracy, he explained, is not to fight for workers, but to contain them. He cited arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court by an AFSCME lawyer during the 2018 *Janus* case, who admitted: "The key thing that has been bargained for in this contract for agency fees is a limitation on striking. And that is true in many collective bargaining agreements."

"Union security is the tradeoff for no strikes," the lawyer told the justices. Without the unions, he warned, "you can raise an untold specter of labor unrest throughout the country."

But, Hall added, "The situation in the United States and around the world has reached the point where massive social struggles are not only on the horizon, they are beginning to break out. The Philadelphia strike is an early indication of that."

He concluded by urging workers to contact the WSWs for assistance building rank-and-file committees: "Get off the sidelines. Join the fight. I think the last word has certainly not been spoken in Philadelphia, and I think we have to anticipate that this is only the beginning of something much, much more powerful."



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