

AFSCME rams through Philadelphia city workers contract in vote marked by low turnout

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Philadelphia's largest city workers' union, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) District Council 33, announced Monday afternoon that its members had ratified a three-year tentative contract agreement with the City of Philadelphia after a week-long in-person vote at union headquarters.

Out of approximately 9,000 eligible members, fewer than 2,400 cast ballots, marking a voter turnout of under 30 percent. The low turnout was effectively a vote of no confidence in the union, which has been actively sabotaging the struggle since the beginning.

The ratification comes in the wake of an eight-day strike which left mounds of trash uncollected throughout the city and garnered widespread public support for the city's workers, many of which are the lowest paid municipal employees of any major city.

AFSCME shut down the strike at the point where it was its most powerful and sprung the new tentative agreement, with barely any difference from the city's initial proposal. With a strike vote looming for thousands of the city's white collar workers, the bureaucracy wanted to shut down the strike before it built into a broader conflict with the Democratic Party, of which AFSCME is a part in all but name.

The city workers, who have had essentially the same contract foisted on them as well, voted by 76 percent to authorize a strike, according to reports over the weekend.

The sudden announcement to end the strike came the day after AFSCME national president and former Democratic National Committee official Lee Saunders visited the picket line. It is clear, however, that the real purpose of his trip was to give the local officials their

marching orders to end the strike as soon as possible.

In a statement published alongside the results, DC 33 president Greg Boulware cynically declared, "Thanks to every member who made their voice heard in the ratification vote ... Together, we made this happen." In reality, the exact opposite is the case.

Throughout the vote, Boulware and DC 33 sought not to convince workers to support the contract, but to sow pessimism that they could get nothing better. Boulware insisted that they'd gotten "as much as we could possibly get out of the city," painting the Democratic administration of Mayor Cherelle Parker as an unstoppable force of nature.

DC 33's passage of the tentative agreement resolves none of the issues facing city workers. The agreement includes 3 percent annual wage increases over three years, plus a \$1,500 bonus in the first year—a sum which will be nearly cut in half once tax deductions are included. It requires workers to maintain residence in the city of Philadelphia, where the cost of living is higher than in the suburbs, in order to remain employed and allows the city to skip payments to the workers' Health and Welfare Fund for the first month of the contract.

There is no doubt that many workers refused to lend any credibility to the betrayal and simply didn't vote. "People wanted it to be over with," a municipal worker said to the *World Socialist Web Site*. "Together we made what happen?" asked another. "Same status quo contract we've been getting. Only this time we removed any leverage from any future strike threat."

The announcement comes as AFSCME DC 47 begins voting on its own tentative agreement. Workers affiliated with DC 47 report having been summoned to

“town hall” style online events in which union leaders shamelessly promote the TA while refusing to let members speak or ask questions.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, which had previously hailed the DC 33 tentative agreement as a victory for “fiscal discipline,” breathed a sigh of relief at the contract ratification, stating within minutes of the announcement that the vote eliminated “the possibility of a city worker strike resuming this year.”

In reality, the contract settles nothing as far as workers are concerned. Philadelphia transit workers are currently facing the expiration of a contract in November as the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority (SEPTA) faces a funding crisis, which will see services and personnel cut to the bone.

Last month, 14,000 Philadelphia public school teachers ratified a strike which could occur as early as August, raising the prospect for a citywide shutdown of public schools as the fall school year begins.

Transit systems and school districts in major cities across the country are facing “doomsday” cuts due to the cut-off of supplemental pandemic funding by the Biden administration last year. The cuts being carried out by Democratic Party city administrations will only intensify as the Republicans dismantle social programs at the federal level.

Under these conditions, the formation of the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee is of critical importance. It was founded to organize a fight against both city officials and the union bureaucracy, as the basis for the expansion of the strike across the city and the US.

Workers in Philadelphia and across the country must draw the lessons of this experience. As long as the union bureaucracy retains control over the struggle, the only possible outcome is a sellout.

The committee has issued a call to expand it to all city workers in Philadelphia and beyond: “This strike has shown that workers are ready to fight. It has shown that the ruling class—Democrats and Republicans alike—are terrified of a real working-class movement. And it has shown that a different leadership is needed.”



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