

How the Democratic Socialists of America helped sell out the Philadelphia municipal workers' strike

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The strike by 9,000 Philadelphia city workers was a strategic experience for the whole working class. Workers were pitted against the Democratic Party, which is working with Republicans to impose massive budget cuts all over the country. It was a preview of an emerging conflict between a mass movement of the working class against the entire capitalist ruling elite.

It also showed that this fight is bound up with a fight against the sellout union bureaucracy. The more power the strike showed, the more AFSCME worked deliberately to undermine it, before finally shutting the strike down after eight days with a contract almost identical to the city's original offer.

From the start, the *World Socialist Web Site* intervened aggressively in the struggle, publishing daily in-depth reports, updates and commentary—to encourage striking workers to expand their strike movement and to warn them about the growing signs that the union officials were looking to sell them out.

The WSWS called on workers to build independent rank-and-file strike committees and spread their struggle throughout the city. The Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee, which was formed during the strike, called for the immediate restart of the walkout, an increase in strike pay to \$750 a week, a contract with 8 percent annual increases and urged the building of “a national network of rank-and-file committees to coordinate the fight.”

By contrast, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), worked to reinforce the authority of the bureaucracy throughout the strike. Their role shows that it is not a socialist organization at all, but a pseudo-left section of the Democrats, which consciously tries to divert the growing move to the left back behind the capitalist two-party system.

At the national level, DSA members such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, vote to ban strikes and approve funding for the Israeli genocide of Gaza. In Pennsylvania, DSA-

supported officials include state senators like Nikil Saval, and US House representatives like Summer Lee and Chris Deluzio.

The Philadelphia chapter supports city council members Kendra Brooks and Nicolas O'Rourke, providing funding and campaign assistance. It holds significant political influence in many other major American cities. It also has significant influence in the union bureaucracy, with DSA members in the leadership of major unions like the United Auto Workers and Chicago Teachers Union.

The DSA helped to enforce a nationwide media blackout in the corporate press. *Jacobin*, the magazine that is the de facto house organ of the DSA, published only two superficial reports—one from *Labor Notes*, another pseudo-left faction within the bureaucracy—and another nearly a week after the strike began. So far, *Jacobin* has not reported the abrupt end of the strike or the controversial tentative agreement imposed on workers.

On the picket lines, they did everything to reinforce the control of the apparatus, preaching passive obedience to the AFSCME higher-ups and preventing broader political issues from emerging. The Philadelphia chapter of the DSA directed supporters visiting the picket line to “follow the union rep and/or strike captain instructions,” and to avoid raising any broader political questions or slogans. Their guidance extended to members' attire—warning not to wear anything with political content that could “start an argument” with union officials.

They explicitly opposed raising a socialist program to broaden the struggle into a fight against capitalism. In an internal group chat, one member argued that a “lot of other orgs are bringing their own branded signs or making it about themselves while DSA is centering the union and not drawing attention to ourselves.”

In fact, what the DSA means is that it is “centering” the AFSCME bureaucracy. Its use of the word “union” in this context is meant to slur over the class gulf between workers

on the one hand and the bureaucracy on the other.

When AFSCME shut down the strike, the DSA deliberately covered up what was happening.

In the same internal discussion, DSA members warned their supporters not to denounce the TA publicly even while privately acknowledging that a sell-out was happening: “The breaking of the strike after [AFSCME president and former Democratic National Committee official] Lee Saunders parachuted in should raise major red flags,” stated one member of the Philadelphia DSA’s steering committee. What they acknowledged among themselves, however, they refused to say in public.

Mat S., a member of the Philly DSA’s steering committee, advised that “we shouldn’t do the World Socialist Website [sic] thing and start screaming about a sellout, but that very may well be what this is ultimately.” In other words, they refused to tell workers what they themselves knew to be the truth.

In so doing, the DSA was a factor in helping AFSCME browbeat the workers into accepting the deal. Because the union bureaucrats told workers they would not fight for a better deal, nothing else could be done. But this was a lie: there was a way forward, through a rebellion against the bureaucracy.

It is the elementary duty of every socialist to “state what is,” to tell workers the truth in order to arm them with an understanding of who their friends and enemies are. But this is exactly what the DSA did not want.

On Saturday, July 26, the Philadelphia DSA’s “labor committee” held a public “reflection and discussion” on the fate of the DC 33 workers’ strike. Political discussion was kept to a minimum, with one member warning the participants to only raise “specific” criticisms of the union apparatus. This was claimed to be necessary in order to promote “positive energy” in the meeting.

This framing served to block political criticism of AFSCME’s leaders. This goal was made evident in the discussion’s focus on the Philadelphia mayor’s numerous injunctions. Many participants lamented the Democratic mayor’s use of the courts to weaken the strike. One strike captain noted that many workers had been “ready to defy the injunctions” and had been “waiting on the leaders to say something,” but never received the support.

Another DSA labor committee member stopped short of drawing any political conclusions from this, instead proposing the members “vote out” city judges who ordered the injunctions. “We’ve got to work within the legal system!” they declared, revealing their subservience to the Democratic Party political establishment.

The DSA acted not merely as apologists but as a part of the union apparatus. AFSCME DC 33 presidents have been

featured speakers at Philadelphia DSA’s events. In 2021, the then-president, Ernest Garrett, was the keynote speaker at the Philadelphia chapter’s biennial convention, where he boasted that he “leads 10,000 members at the forefront of fighting city budget cuts and demanding a safe work environment.”

Garrett was later removed from his post in 2024 due to allegations of mishandling union funds and corrupt hiring practices.

Across multiple cities, the DSA has been instrumental in helping the American capitalist class betray workers’ struggles to benefit the Democratic Party and the capitalist establishment. The Philadelphia municipal strike followed the Chicago teachers’ contract battle, where the DSA-led Chicago Teachers Union collaborated with DSA-backed mayor of Chicago Brandon Johnson to push through a contract on the workers based on false promises.

But immediately after the deal, the city declared a financial crisis and is now considering ripping up even this inadequate contract. Meanwhile, the Chicago Transit Authority is preparing “doomsday” cuts, much like the Philadelphia transit system is preparing, which would permanently damage systems on which millions rely.

“Every effort has been made to suppress any genuine resistance among educators,” wrote a rank-and-file member of the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Committee in a letter addressed to Philadelphia educators. “The CTU leadership, in alliance with the DSA-backed Johnson administration, told teachers to publicly pledge allegiance to the mayor, assuring them of his supposed support, even as layoffs multiplied.”

The central function of the DSA is to enforce the authority of the union bureaucracy, keep workers tied to the Democratic Party, and contain any movement for independent action among the working class.

In the end, the Philadelphia experience underscored the necessity for genuine rank-and-file leadership and the rejection of all efforts to subordinate worker struggles to the interests of union bureaucracies and their political patrons.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party’s fight to build and expand the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee represents a critical step forward in the fight to break the grip of the union bureaucracy, which functions as a central pillar of capitalist politics.



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