

No contract offer in sight as Philadelphia public school teachers press for August 31 strike

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Philadelphia teachers are preparing to return to classrooms in just one week, on August 18, even as negotiations between the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) have failed to produce any offers covering nearly 14,000 public school teachers in the eighth largest school system in the United States.

In June, 94 percent of the school system's educators and support workers voted to strike if no contract had been reached by August 31, when their current contract extension expires. Philadelphia teachers' contract talks remain stalled over chronic understaffing, large class sizes, low pay and punitive sick leave rules. They are demanding better staffing, pay and working conditions.

PFT president Arthur Steinberg told Philadelphia Chalkbeat that negotiations have been "moving more slowly than I would like" but that "some progress" had been made, although he would not indicate where.

The teachers' struggle comes amid a major funding crisis within the public school system and more broadly. The SDP has projected a \$306 million deficit in the 2026 fiscal year. The school district, which is unable to raise local taxes to cover its schools due to laws at the state level, has been forced to dip into its rainy day fund to cover chronic underfunding.

The school system is asking the state government to provide funds to cover the local shortfall but neither the Democratic Party-controlled State House or the Republicans in the State Senate have agreed to a plan. What is more, it is now over a month into the 2026 fiscal year; without a fixed budget, the district could begin to default on payments.

Across the United States, teachers are facing looming contract expirations as they confront deep financial

crises. While governments have billions to spend on war and military aid to genocidal regimes such as the Israeli government, few resources are given to schools and other public services.

In Denver Colorado, teachers' contracts will also end August 31, 2025. Teachers in major California cities received a contract last June featuring raises that barely meet the cost of living. Chicago teachers, represented in bargaining by the Chicago Teachers Union, reached a deal in April after the CTU lied to get the tentative agreement passed. That contract is now on the verge of being ripped up by the school district in response to a major fiscal crisis, which has been public knowledge for some time.

New York City, Los Angeles and Chicago, along with Philadelphia, grapple with deep, lasting budget deficits driven by rising costs and the loss of pandemic aid—forcing cuts, hiring freezes and pension funding pressures that strain both municipal finances and their school systems.

The teachers' struggle unfolds against the backdrop of the strike of 9,000 Philadelphia municipal workers last month, as well as a deep financial crisis in the city's transit system, threatening massive disruption and deepening layoffs.

The city workers' strike nearly shut the city down for a little over a week before AFSCME District Council 33, working hand-in-glove with the Democratic Party government of Mayor Cherelle Parker and a coterie of Democratic Party satellite organizations, ended the strike with a contract that contained sub-inflation wage increases that were only 1 percent better than the city had previously offered before the strike began.

The Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike

Committee that emerged out of this betrayal, founded by workers involved in the strike and throughout the city, has demanded the strike be “expanded to include transit workers, white-collar employees and all other sections of the working class in Philadelphia,” and that there be a clean break from the union leaders and Democratic Party officials that sold them out.

It is essential for educators to link up their struggles in a common offensive against the working and living conditions which have been imposed on them in city after city. This requires that educators form independent rank-and-file organizations which are capable of taking their struggle out of the hands of the well-paid trade union bureaucrats who aid the city administration by isolating and betraying the working population.

The PFT is no different in this regard. Following 14,000 teachers ratifying a vote to strike in June, PFT president Steinberg proceeded to hold joint rallies with SDP officials at the state capital as the state budget negotiations continued. Steinberg declared barely a week after the nearly unanimous vote to strike that “though we may disagree at times, I know that [SDP] Superintendent [Tony] Watlington and Board President [Reginald] Streater want what our members want: Appropriately staffed and resourced schools where children and communities are able to thrive.”

The PFT issued an internal email once the AFSCME municipal workers’ sellout contract was safely ratified and the struggle had been stifled, declaring it was “grateful for the example set by our courageous siblings at AFSCME DC 33” and that, “It was gratifying to see so many PFT members holding the line with DC 33.”

In fact, the PFT leaders did nothing during the municipal strike, proclaiming empty slogans of “solidarity” even as other unions ordered their members to cross the picket line.

The union is making a bogus show of faux-militancy, holding nightly “strike ready” events in which members are being asked to come up with “clever slogans” and “picket chants” ahead of the contract deadline.

As with similar spectacles, such as the phony “strike ready” campaign organized by the Teamsters during the UPS workers’ contract battle in 2023, such posturing will be used as a way to blow off steam while ensuring

that the eventual TA that is forced on the educators will be accepted.

The PFT arranged for the current contract to be extended last year so as not to conflict with the 2024 presidential election. Jerry Jordan, the PFT’s president at the time, praised this maneuver as being a “forward-thinking down payment” on the future of education in the city.

In fact it was a sham. The major teachers unions themselves have published figures showing that, on average, Philadelphia teachers’ wages have declined by at least 5 percent in the past decade even when raises are taken into consideration. New teachers in Philadelphia currently receive \$3,700 less than their peers did in 2007-2008, even as inflation has risen in the region by 57 percent.

The PFT leadership’s real relationship to the SDP was expressed in Steinberg’s comments to Chalkbeat. According to the PFT president, “The district’s ‘initial set of proposals weren’t as irksome as they usually are.’” He went on to add there was “nothing that set a bad tone, as it has in the past.” He further added it was unlikely that teachers would be called on to “walk out tomorrow.”

It is critical for educators to learn from the experience of the municipal workers’ struggle from July. The Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee, in reflecting on their struggle, noted several “urgent lessons” to be studied.

- Austerity and attacks on living standards are not isolated “negotiation issues,” but part of a coordinated effort between both established parties and the union bureaucracy.

DC 33 and other union leaderships are instruments of the political establishment, blocking, demobilizing and betraying workers’ struggles...

- It is necessary for workers to establish their own independent organizations as these struggles approach, in order to effectively combat the combination of management and the union bureaucracy.



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