

Philadelphia teachers: Prepare for a struggle—break the cycle of sellout, unite the working class, and build rank-and-file power!

Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee
21 August 2025

The following is a statement of the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee, founded by city workers last month to oppose the sabotage of their strike by union bureaucrats. To become involved in rank-and-file committees, fill out the form below.

Philadelphia Teachers:

Across the United States and internationally, workers face attacks amid massive budget deficits, threats of layoffs and austerity policies forcing cuts to education, transit, health care and social programs. Cities are being bled dry to pay for tax cuts, corporate profits and endless wars, while millions are left without access to essential services.

This crisis is mirrored across all major urban centers. Chicago Public Schools are confronting budget shortfalls exceeding \$400 million, while New York City faces deficits in the hundreds of millions. Austerity backed by state and federal policies drives these shortfalls. The “Big Beautiful Bill” promoted by Trump exemplifies this attack on municipalities, mandating harsh fiscal controls and advancing a dictatorship that threatens troop deployment to crush working class opposition.

Philadelphia’s public schools are a center of this crisis. The School District faces a looming \$306 million budget deficit for the 2026 fiscal year, forcing officials to tap 40 percent of their “rainy day” fund just to cover immediate expenses. But this is only a short-term measure—deficits are projected to rise to \$466 million in 2027, \$774 million in 2030, and cumulative debt could reach \$2 billion within five years.

Losses of \$125 million in federal COVID-19 relief funding, soaring charter school payments and inflation compound the problem. Philadelphia is unique in Pennsylvania because its school district cannot raise its own taxes and depends entirely on city and state budgets

for 99 percent of its operating revenue.

Philadelphia’s transit system, SEPTA, also faces a “doomsday” budget, with layoffs and service reductions planned to start next week. These cuts will hit tens of thousands of workers and daily riders especially hard, home values will plummet as whole communities will be deprived of transport.

But these assaults are meeting with a response in the working class nationally and internationally.

The 9,000-strong municipal worker strike in our city last month was just the tip of the iceberg. Thousands of Boeing workers in Missouri launched a sustained strike, and Canadian Air Canada flight attendants boldly defied federal back-to-work orders.

These struggles represent the emergence of a mass movement rising against untenable social conditions, growing political instability and fierce opposition to war and dictatorship. Philadelphia’s teachers must grasp that their fight belongs to this larger battle. We must develop a strategy based on mobilizing the working class as a whole to impose a durable, workers’ solution to the crisis.

The School District’s budget woes sharply expose the class divide in America. Instead of adequately funding basic services, Philadelphia is funneling billions into policing. The police contract ratified recently awards officers two consecutive 3 percent raises, \$3,000 one-time bonuses, new wellness days, expanded sick leave benefits, and a \$5 million lump sum payment to the retiree trust fund. This \$343 million package over five years dwarfs the offers made to public school workers and other municipal employees, highlighting the city’s brutal priorities.

As we approach the expiration of your contract on August 31, Philadelphia teachers face a crucial choice. The union bureaucrats which run the Philadelphia

Federation of Teachers (PFT) are aligned with the political establishment, not with the rank-and-file.

After the AFSCME strike, PFT President Arthur Steinberg downplayed the chance of an immediate strike, dismissing contract offers as “not as irksome as they have been in the past.” The PFT’s “strike ready” meetings last week were a trap to pacify and mislead, not build real militancy. The AFL-CIO’s bus tour visiting these events echoes AFSCME leaders’ efforts to control and contain worker anger by sending their national president and longtime Democratic Party executive, Lee Saunders, to a DC 33 picket line—just as AFSCME leaders cut short their strike.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has warned that “the more powerful the position of the workers, the more determined and blatant the sabotage by the bureaucracy.” DC 47, the AFSCME municipal union for white collar workers, signed a two-week contract extension with the city—deliberately isolating their membership and ensuring their strike could not coincide or unify with DC 33’s, thereby undermining the possibility of a broader, joint struggle. They also announced a tentative agreement that met none of their members’ needs the same day as the latter voted by 76 percent to strike.

The union leaders’ number one priority is protecting their relationships with Democrats and proving their reliability to management, not securing real gains for workers. This explains AFSCME’s betrayal: cutting the strike short and imposing a contract raising wages just one percent beyond the city’s initial offer—an insult to the workers’ struggle.

Similarly, the PFT’s record includes ratifying school closures, unsafe reopenings during COVID-19, and selling out rank-and-file actions. Their “strike ready” campaign, originating in the 2023 Teamsters UPS contract sellout, was never meant to prepare workers for a real strike. It’s a smokescreen meant to push a sellout as a “historic” victory.

The cycle of union sellouts must end. Waiting to vote out corrupt leadership only leads to a rotation of more and more betrayals. Philadelphia teachers must organize independently now.

Our fight is part of a growing national and international conflict. California’s school districts also face contract expirations and austerity attacks. A far stronger, more militant movement is possible—but only if we reject bureaucratic control and build this rank-and-file committee that prioritizes worker solidarity and real struggle over sellouts.

Moreover, transparency in contract negotiations must be demanded. Like DC 33’s leaders, the PFT wants to keep its members in the dark, delivering cryptic and unsubstantial “updates” which tell us nothing at all.

Following our contract deadline, SEPTA’s 5,000 transit workers face a contract expiration in November. Our struggles are deeply intertwined and the need to join forces has never been greater. Tens of thousands of people depend on SEPTA daily. Our strike has the potential to ignite a regional and national movement of public workers confronting similar crises.

The Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee calls on you—organize our schools, talk to coworkers, spread the word, and build independent power within the whole working class. As our statement on AFSCME’s strike explained:

“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.”

It is a proven, iron law that as long as a struggle remains in the hands of the bureaucracy, the only possible outcome is a betrayal. The only path to victory is building independent rank-and-file strength and solidarity.

Join the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee today and seize our future. Our fight is central to the global struggle for justice, dignity, and workers’ rights. The time to act is now.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact