

Philadelphia teachers union announces tentative agreement with no details a week before contract expires for 14,000 educators

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The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) announced a tentative contract agreement for its 14,000 members on Sunday night, just before the first day of classes, in a transparent effort to disrupt any movement of the working class amid a growing wave of struggle. In June, the members voted by 94 percent to ratify a strike if the school district did not offer them a tentative agreement before contract expiration.

None of the details of the TA have been shown to members. An internal email sent to PFT members simply tells them “the PFT and School District of Philadelphia have reached a tentative contract agreement, and school will open on time.” It informs members they will “receive several emails over the next few days with details about the agreement, and the date and time of the ratification meeting.”

Philadelphia teachers must join and build the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee to avoid the betrayal that is being carried out. Only through independent rank-and-file action can educators defend their wages, working conditions and dignity against the austerity imposed by union bureaucrats and city officials.

The potential movement of this powerful section of the American working class, with a long history of militant struggle, terrifies the capitalist class throughout the region and more broadly. Last month’s 9,000-strong strike by Philadelphia municipal workers, shutting down essential services, shook the city and drew mass public support. This is precisely why the AFSCME union bureaucrats shut the strike down when it was at its most powerful.

As striking workers gained momentum, the city’s Democratic Party leaders turned to the union

officialdom to scab on the strike and shut down the struggle at all costs. Now, desperate to prevent further working-class struggle, the city is relying heavily on union officials to suppress militant worker action.

In addition to Philadelphia, Denver’s public school teachers are also voting on their own sellout contract. Denver’s 6,000 educators were among the wave of teachers who launched strike action in 2018-2019. Contracts for virtually every major school district in California also expired over the summer, although the California Teachers Association has refused to call a strike, nearly two weeks into the school year in some cities.

School districts and municipalities throughout the country are facing a brutal wave of austerity, which is being deepened by funding cuts at the federal level. In Illinois, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) recently lied to the school district’s 27,000 members, promising them protection from the Trump administration’s budget cuts in a new contract, only to have the city declare a financial emergency and begin eliminating teacher positions. More cuts are planned in districts throughout the country.

The teachers’ struggle comes as the Trump administration has mobilized federal troops and soldiers to seize control of the District of Columbia while targeting other cities to expand Trump’s coup plans, citing crime and immigration as justification. Philadelphia has appeared on Trump’s Department of Justice’s list of targets recently, due to its so-called “sanctuary city” laws.

In Philadelphia, the school district faces a massive funding crisis. The SDP is facing massive deficits of around \$306 million. The district plans to use 40

percent of its reserves—funds accumulated largely from federal COVID-19 relief—to cover this gap and avoid immediate cuts to classrooms and staffing.

However, the deficit is expected to be \$15 million in 2027 and could balloon to over \$2 billion within five years if current trends continue. Due to state laws, Philadelphia cannot raise money through local taxes to solve its budget shortfalls.

Union leaders rushed to proclaim the deal on Sunday evening, hailing “stability” for more than 100,000 students — but their real concern was ensuring school doors open on time, regardless of the unresolved crises facing educators.

PFT president Arthur Steinberg appeared alongside School District of Philadelphia superintendent Tony Watlington and Democratic Philadelphia Mayor Cherelle Parker at a press conference Sunday to announce the TA. Steinberg was unable to contain his excitement, declaring he was “thrilled” at the prospect “that school will open on time, as well as three years of labor peace.” He declared the coming TA was a “historic” victory.

In fact, it is a historic betrayal. Watlington hinted at the real content of the TA, stating it “maintains our record of strong financial stewardship.”

Philadelphia teachers voted to strike in June following decades of social attacks which have placed them among the lowest-paid workers in the region. As of 2025, the average annual salary for a Philadelphia public school teacher is about \$47,000 to \$62,000, with starting salaries around \$54,000 for those with a bachelor’s degree and one year of experience.

Teaching assistants, an expanding group of exploited education workers, are paid between \$25,000-\$35,000 a year, placing them below the city’s unrealistically low poverty line for a family of four (\$32,000).

Unsurprisingly, teachers and assistants are demanding substantial pay increases to compensate for their work. They also demand an end to the existing sick leave policy that penalizes teachers for using their contractually protected sick days, and the addition of 12 weeks of paid parental leave—none of which was included in the previous contract.

The TA’s announcement indicates the fraudulent character of the PFT’s series of “strike ready” events held several weeks ago. Rather than preparing to strike, the stunts were part of an attempt to posture as it

hammered out the details of the sellout with SDP leaders. Throughout these events, Steinberg gave press statements noting he had no intention of going on strike and that negotiations with the school district “weren’t as irksome as they usually are.”

For months, the PFT and district officials quietly worked out the details, offering no information to educators in whose interest they were supposedly bargaining. Without providing updates on negotiations, union officials were able to hide details about the concessions they were making and what the school district’s demands were.

It is critical that educators act to countermand this sellout. The Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Committee, formed during the municipal city worker strike in July to fight back against the AFSCME union leadership’s betrayal of their struggle, has issued a call to the city’s teachers, declaring that “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.”

It appealed to teachers to unite with Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) workers, who are currently facing massive job losses as the system implements its destructive “doomsday” budget cutbacks.

On Sunday, as Philadelphia teachers were being informed about the TA, SEPTA initiated the first wave of service cuts to its system. These include the axing of 32 bus routes, a 20 percent reduction; and reduced frequency across all rail lines. In September, the system will enact a 21.5 percent fare hike, leaving the system teetering on the edge of collapse.

This occurs as 5,000 SEPTA employees will see their contract expire in November. As the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee states, “Our struggles are deeply intertwined and the need to join forces has never been greater... Our strike has the potential to ignite a regional and national movement of public workers confronting similar crises.”



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