

What teachers need to know about the sellout contract in Philadelphia

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27 August 2025

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On Sunday night, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers announced a tentative agreement with the School District of Philadelphia aimed at blocking a strike and defusing growing militant sentiment among educators.

The deal offers small raises and token parental leave, harsher attendance discipline and rising healthcare costs. The union's betrayal undermines teachers' living standards and working conditions while aiming to forestall class struggle in the face of increasing exploitation, war, genocide and the threat of dictatorship.

The TA's real intent was signaled when PFT President Arthur Steinberg stated he was "thrilled that we have been able to reach a tentative agreement with the School District of Philadelphia on a three-year pact ensuring that school will open on time." Steinberg added that the TA would ensure "three years of labor peace."

In reality, the contract does not mean "peace" but would disarm teachers in the face of an escalating class war. The ruling class is slashing spending on schools, healthcare, transit and other social expenditures to the bone, while Trump is deploying troops into American cities, with Philadelphia explicitly threatened as one of his next targets. Moreover, immigration police are rampaging against parents and students, with arrests already beginning outside schools in Southern California.

At issue is not only a contract but a mass movement in the working class in defense of its democratic and social rights.

It is under these conditions that the PFT has defied an overwhelming strike vote. Its "strike ready" campaign has been exposed by this contract as a smokescreen for a sellout. It is also a warning to educators in other school districts, especially in California, where the California

Teachers Association's "We Can't Wait" campaign has the same basic aim.

The contract proves that educators require new structures, rank-and-file committees, which they control in order to override the sellout and challenge the bureaucratic dictatorship in the PFT. The first duty of such a movement is to pierce the lies about the contract and tell workers the truth.

Contents of the tentative agreement

Far from a "historic" agreement, the PFT conceded to a mere 3 percent annual wage increase over the next three years. This amount does not even compensate for inflation, which in Philadelphia currently stands at 3.3 percent. In effect, the PFT has conceded to an almost 1 percent wage cut over the course of the next three years.

The \$1,400 retention bonus it has presented is a one-time sop that fails to address long-standing wage stagnation and deteriorating living standards.

Healthcare premiums are set to rise sharply for those in the Personal Choice Plan (PC), shifting growing costs onto teachers struggling to make ends meet. The TA states that employees enrolled in the PC medical plan will see their required premium percentage rise each year, from 8 percent (September 2025), to 9 percent (September 2026), to 9.5 percent (September 2027) of the premium cost. Previously, 0, 3 and 5 percent rates applied to some groups, but new hires and those switching plans face higher costs.

In a "highlights" flyer, the PFT attempts to cover this up with a lie of omission, claiming that there will be "no change in EXISTING medical premiums," without admitting that new teachers will face higher rates.

The union maintained ruthless attendance discipline in the agreement. The framework harshly penalizes workers for illness and family emergencies, reinforcing an atmosphere of fear and control over teachers' lives.

Under the previous "3-5-7-9" policy, disciplinary "occurrences" (days absent) included any period of absence lasting 1-3 days. The new policy removes counting occurrences for 1-3 day absences altogether, and instead triggers discipline only after 10 total missed days. This technically raises the threshold for discipline but narrows the counting method, in reality allowing fewer total absences before discipline than under the old policy.

The PFT dishonestly disguises this change in its statements, telling teachers that 3-5-7-9 has been "ELIMINATED" and that they will receive "no discipline for using your ten sick days."

Token paid parental leave was grudgingly granted—25 days, far below international standards. However, even this slight gain was delayed, not being allowed until 2026.

Meanwhile, kindergarten teachers lose paid interview time, cutting essential hours for engagement with rising kindergartners and their families as well as pay. "I say it every year and I'll say it again: Kindergarten needs to start a week later (like we used to) and conduct family interviews with each child and family BEFORE they start school," said a Philadelphia kindergarten teacher as classes started this week.

"Who thought it was acceptable to have five-year-olds dropped off into a building they've never been in, to a teacher they've never met?? It's disgraceful, not to mention an enormous safety risk. ... I had a non-verbal student come today with a schoolbag full of diapers, medication and a communication device, unbeknownst to me. I had two students who spoke NO English at all. I had one with right-side paralysis. One with a developmental delay. Two more with unspecified IEPs (individualized education plans). None of this is flagged ..."

The teacher concluded by stating, "90% of the issues today could have been prevented or at least better prepared for if we had been allowed to meet students and families ahead of time."

Tasks facing educators in Philadelphia

It is critical for educators to vote "no" to reject this tentative agreement. But to simply vote "no" with the

expectation that it will force the PFT back to the bargaining table to come up with something better is a serious mistake.

By returning such a concession-laden TA to teachers, let alone trying to sell it to members with lying praises, demonstrates that the PFT cares nothing for educators or children and is on the side of the employers.

The Philadelphia school crisis is deeply tied to a broader municipal disaster gripping the city and municipalities across the country. Chicago is facing a severe municipal funding crisis with a nearly \$1.1 billion budget gap in FY2025 and recurring structural deficits that have gone unaddressed for years. Last spring, the Chicago Teachers Union deceived members by pushing a contract as layoffs mounted, leaving educators to fend for themselves in the face of the municipal crisis.

In Denver, where 6,000 educators are also facing a contract expiration this month, the city is grappling with a \$200 million budget gap for 2026. The mayor has imposed hiring freezes and ordered furloughs, signaling harsh cutbacks.

In Philadelphia, the school district faces a \$300 million budget deficit, while the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority (SEPTA)'s budget crisis threatens the daily commute of 50,000 Philadelphia schoolchildren. These devastating austerity measures will ripple through the region's working class.

The educators' struggle cannot be isolated—Workers and educators must unite. The Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee has called on teachers to join it and bring this fight into the heart of the working class. Together, they can build the power to oppose cuts and demand justice. The committee declares in its most recent statement:

"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."



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