

Philadelphia teachers union rams through contract in sham vote

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After weeks of posturing that it was preparing to call a strike by August 31, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) abruptly rammed through a sellout contract Thursday night in order to prevent a walkout by 14,000 educators in the nation's eighth-largest school district.

The contract was presented during a tightly choreographed virtual town hall meeting. Voting was restricted to the course of the online event, where union officials pre-screened questions and blocked critical comments. According to the union's own figures, less than half of the membership participated. Only 4,000 ballots were cast in favor—barely one quarter of the total membership—yet the PFT declared the agreement ratified.

This sham vote cannot be considered legitimate or binding by teachers. Philadelphia educators must organize themselves to override this sellout and prepare collective action. General meetings, excluding PFT officials or district administrators, should be called by educators at every school to discuss the way forward. Teachers should elect members of a district-wide rank-and-file committee to coordinate joint actions, up to and including the strike action which 94 percent of the district voted to authorize.

The agreement provides a 3 percent wage increase per year, a raise that does not keep pace with inflation in Philadelphia, currently at 3.3 percent. It introduces increased healthcare premiums of between 8.5 and 9.5 percent per year for new-hires. In a self-serving “highlights” sheet, the union covered this up, boasting that there would be “no change in EXISTING medical premiums” (emphasis in original). Paid interview time for kindergarten teachers has been eliminated, while parental leave provisions will not even take effect until next year.

Even by the standards of the American trade union

bureaucracy, the maneuvers to ram through this contract are noteworthy for their brazenness and crudeness.

Over the summer, PFT members had voted by 94 percent to authorize a strike. Between August 11 and 15, the union organized several “strike ready” events, including picket sign-making events and rallies. At the time, PFT President Arthur Steinberg told the media that the union was “not even close to working out a deal with the school district.”

But the instant the PFT suddenly announced the tentative agreement Sunday night, only hours before the start of the school year, its tone changed by 180 degrees. From claiming to be preparing a strike against a recalcitrant administration, Steinberg boasted to the corporate press that the deal would provide the city with “three years of labor peace.”

In fact, there is no “peace.” This contract is aimed at disarming educators in the face of an escalating class war.

Philadelphia schools face a \$300 million deficit, while the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) is carrying out “doomsday” service cuts. The situation in Philadelphia is replicated in every major urban district across the country.

The city is also one of the areas where President Trump has threatened to deploy the National Guard as part of his ongoing coup d'état. By sabotaging a movement of the working class, the only social force capable of defeating Trump's fascist campaign, the unions are playing directly into his hands.

PFT officials used intimidation and manipulation to present the contract as a *fait accompli*. Educators reported on social media that they were told the union would not call a strike even if members rejected the deal. Facebook groups for Philadelphia teachers attempted to censor all discussion of the contract, at the behest of union officials.

The entire “strike ready” campaign was a maneuver to get in front of explosive rank-and-file anger and channel it

safely back under bureaucratic control.

The PFT's actions are lifted directly from the playbook of the Teamsters apparatus at UPS in 2023, which used a "strike ready campaign" to push through their own concessionary agreement by presenting it as the product of "a credible strike threat." The "labor peace" provided by that contract is now being used by the logistics giant to eliminate tens of thousands of jobs. Since then, the Teamsters bureaucracy under General President Sean O'Brien has become a major ally of Trump.

Far from a sign of strength, such maneuvers reflect the profound weakness of the union apparatus. It is terrified of the growing opposition from below, which is fueled by impossible living and working conditions and the escalating attack on democratic rights. The union bureaucrats were evidently worried that not only a strike, but even an extended contract vote would give workers the chance to build a movement that would escape their control.

This betrayal in Philadelphia follows the shutdown of the AFSCME municipal strike in July, just as it was beginning to develop into a confrontation with the Democratic Party. The strike had totally disrupted July 4 festivities, leading headliners to cancel and residents to boycott official events. Explaining to the press how she was able to get employees back to work, Mayor Cherelle Parker declared smugly, "[AFSCME] District Council 33—they are me. I am District Council 33. They are my people."

Teachers across the country are entering into struggle. In California, educators in virtually every major district are pressing for strike action, while their colleagues in Chicago, New York and elsewhere are fighting massive cuts. At the federal level, the Trump administration is accelerating the dismantling of public education, while state and local Democrats are no less ruthless in diverting resources from schools into corporate subsidies, war, and debt payments.

California teachers should take a warning from Philadelphia. The California Teachers Association has launched its own hollow "we can't wait" campaign, while deliberately stalling any strike action two weeks into the school year. The union leadership is waiting for momentum to dissipate in order to push through concessions.

The outcome in Philadelphia confirms what the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee explained during the AFSCME strike: "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."

To wage a genuine fight, educators must form independent rank-and-file committees. Such committees will give workers the ability to override decisions that violate the will of the membership, impose democratic control over bargaining, and organize collective action up to and including strikes, regardless of the opposition of the officialdom.

This fight is part of a broader movement of the working class. Through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), educators must link up with workers across industries to prepare a national counteroffensive against inequality, dictatorship, and war.

Such a fight requires independence from the union bureaucrats and the Democratic Party, who are far more terrified of a movement from below than of Trump.

The Trump administration's fascistic policies are not simply the product of one man's mind, but of the uncontrollable growth of social inequality and oligarchic rule, which are incompatible with democracy.

The "iron law," extended to the whole of society, means that as workers remain under the control of the union bureaucrats and the Democrats, the only possible outcome of the political crisis is dictatorship. This is because the only way to defend democratic rights is through a massive struggle by the working class against inequality and capitalist exploitation, the source of dictatorship.



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