

For the 2nd year in a row, Philadelphia transit union officials force members to stay at work after their contract expires

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On Friday, the one-year contract covering more than 5,000 operators, conductors and support staff at the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) expired. Despite this, leaders of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 234 instructed members to remain on the job while negotiations continue, postponing any strike action as they seek a new multiyear agreement.

“As we continue to bargain, we’re asking you to please continue to come to work and put money aside” in preparation for a possible strike, said TWU Local 234 President Will Vera in a public statement last week. Vera showed contempt toward the membership, hypocritically declaring after admitting to violating their rights that “a work stoppage cannot be called until we [the officials] call for the strike authorization vote, and you can expect more information to happen next week.”

The contract expiration comes amid a worsening fiscal crisis in Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia region. The state has gone more than 100 days without an approved budget, producing funding uncertainty for county governments, public schools, mass transit and other services.

The Economy League of Greater Philadelphia found that inflation in the region peaked above 8 percent in June 2022 and remained elevated through 2023 and 2024.

Workers in cities across the country face similar situations. New York City is grappling with unfunded liabilities totaling \$186.3 billion and recurring multibillion-dollar deficits, leading to a credit downgrade in early 2025. Los Angeles faced comparable financial downgrades tied to wildfire losses

and budget strain.

In Washington D.C., the Trump administration’s continued attacks on federal workers and agencies have caused a regional economic slump. Hundreds of thousands remain jobless amid the administration’s orchestrated federal shutdown. These measures are part of the administration’s drive to slash public spending, enrich the financial elite and build an authoritarian dictatorship over the country.

In September, Democratic Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro approved SEPTA’s request to redirect up to \$394 million in capital assistance funds, originally intended for infrastructure and maintenance, toward daily operations.

SEPTA workers have been under one-year contracts since 2023, after TWU Local 234 executives ignored a strike authorization vote and ordered members to keep working in the days following the 2024 presidential election.

Workers are now demanding raises that match or surpass inflation. They are also calling for improved sick leave and medical claim handling, better scheduling to reduce involuntary overtime and increased safety measures, such as bulletproof driver enclosures on buses. Additionally, workers are seeking a two-year deal to provide greater job stability after years of short-term contracts created during the pandemic’s financial turbulence.

Funding shifts have strained SEPTA’s relationship with its workforce. The Philadelphia *Inquirer* reported that the agency postponed the purchase of new buses, including models with driver protection features, because of the diversion of infrastructure funds to operations.

Union leaders have provided no explanation for denying members the right to strike. Vera vaguely referred to SEPTA's "need for dedicated funding," even as TWU officials claimed that new cash from the state's Public Transportation Trust Fund gave management flexibility to meet some demands.

This refusal to act follows a series of sellouts across Philadelphia's public sector.

In July, AFSCME District Council 33 leaders abruptly ended a strike by 9,000 municipal workers without a vote after the walkout threatened to escape their control and destabilize Democratic Mayor Cherelle Parker's administration.

As the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee wrote after the deal, "The union officials sprung this deal on workers behind their backs and ended the strike without a vote. This shows that they are working hand in hand with the city to prevent the strike from developing into a broader fight against inequality and the Democratic Party."

The tentative agreement failed to meet any key demands, offering only a 1 percent raise higher than the rejected proposal. After a contract ratification with record-low turnout, the committee commented, "Any real fightback—whether among teachers, transit workers, sanitation workers or any other public sector group—depends on breaking from the union apparatus and building rank-and-file committees that unify and coordinate resistance. The Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee was formed explicitly for this task."

This continued in August, when the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) announced a tentative agreement just hours before its contract expired, forcing the deal through in a quick two-hour Zoom ratification vote. Prior to that, the union staged "strike-ready" rallies that amounted to publicity stunts rather than genuine preparation for struggle.

Only days after the contract was ratified, the School District of Philadelphia announced plans to close dozens of schools and lay off hundreds of teachers.

The Democratic Party's pseudo-left hangers-on, such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), have been a critical conduit for the union apparatus to maintain its control over workers' struggles. Throughout the municipal workers' strike in July, the Philadelphia chapter of the DSA actively helped

reinforce the union leadership's betrayal, forbidding any of its members and supporters from denouncing the sellout TA. Nationally, the DSA's publications barely reported on the strike.

Following in its previous practices, the DSA has said nothing about the most recent betrayal at SEPTA, dutifully ignoring the issue and taking its lead from the Democratic Party at the local and state levels.

Negotiations at SEPTA remain active, and TWU Local 234 may soon hold a strike authorization vote. SEPTA workers must draw the lessons from these past experiences and join the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee to prepare for an independent fight that removes control from the TWU officials seeking to limit and weaken their movement.

They must link their struggle with other sections of the working class. In addition to teachers and municipal employees, they should reach out to hotel workers, including those at Philadelphia's historic Wyndham Hotel who began striking Saturday for higher pay and manageable workloads. These workers hold major leverage as the city prepares for next year's 250th anniversary celebrations and the 2026 FIFA World Cup—events that make their unity with transit workers all the more critical.



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