Philadelphia transit workers vote to strike as union officials seek to block action

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17 November 2025

In a unanimous vote Sunday, transit workers affiliated with Transport Workers Union Local 234 voted to strike against the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA).

SEPTA workers are considered among the most strike-prone workers in the country, having struck at least 10 times in the past 50 years — including a powerful 44-day work stoppage in 1977. For the past three years, 5,000 SEPTA workers have been working under one-year contracts following the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely impacted transit ridership and revenue.

The workers are demanding a two-year contract, improved benefits, changes to outdated work rules, and a major overhaul of sick pay policy, which workers say is currently riddled with penalties and bureaucracy. They have been working without a contract since November 7, when their TWU 234 leaders let the previous contract expire without saying a word.

Finally, after nine days, leadership was compelled to call a strike authorization vote in the face of growing discontent among workers. “Demanding a meeting made them [TWU 234 leaders] schedule one… It’s a courtesy and consideration to your membership, informing us of what we are up against. I’m sick of people making excuses for poor leadership instead of holding them accountable,” said one SEPTA employee on social media.

Initially, local union officials made excuses for not calling a strike authorization vote. “Do y’all really understand how this works? A good Union President’s job is to try his best to resolve and solidify a fair and equitable contract for his members without any work stoppage,” declared TWU 234 business agent Juan Barrow in response to members’ demands on social media.

Barrow, constructing an absurd argument, went on to declare, “You should never call a strike when the two parties are far apart. You have to strategically put yourself in a position to keep the work stoppage to a minimum…”

Having been forced to call a strike authorization vote, TWU 234 officials were quick to insist that a strike was still off the table. “I am not at this moment ready to call a strike,” TWU 234 president Will Vera said to news media. He added that striking will be “the last measure” if SEPTA doesn’t start to “bargain fairly.”

Only betrayal can come from this arrangement. It is critical for SEPTA workers to take the initiative now and join the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee that was formed amid the 9,000-strong municipal strike last summer.

The committee stated from the outset that its goal was “to organize our coworkers in a fight against both the Democratic city administration and their agents in the union apparatus. This committee will give us real power over our own struggle, break through the isolation and lies, and build a powerful movement uniting us with workers across Philadelphia and throughout the United States.”

Officials have sought to emphasize SEPTA’s weak financial state to justify their kid-gloves approach to the transit authority. On November 12, Pennsylvania’s state legislature was able to pass a fiscal year 2025-2026 budget after a 135-day delay past the July 1 deadline.

The budget offers nothing to the ailing transit authority, citing Pennsylvania’s Democratic governor Josh Shapiro’s decision in September to allow SEPTA to use up to $394 million from its capital fund, normally reserved for infrastructure projects, for operating expenses to avoid immediate service cuts and fare hikes for up to two years. SEPTA’s $213 million budget shortfall for the previous fiscal year remains, and operating funding has remained essentially flat.

“We are deeply disappointed that the budget … does not address the urgent need for additional, recurring funding for public transit,” stated SEPTA CEO Leslie Richards of the newly passed budget. Richards added, “Using capital dollars for operating expenses is a short-term solution, not a fix for our long-term challenges.”

In fact, public services throughout the state of Pennsylvania have regularly been underfunded and attacked at the state and local levels, with officials from various

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jurisdictions and municipalities pointing fingers at one another to both redirect opposition and reduce workers to bystanders.

At the same time, Pennsylvania has a long record of using economic development subsidies, such as the Keystone Opportunity Zone program, direct grants, infrastructure investments for private employers, and tax abatements, to entice corporations to relocate, expand, or keep jobs in the state.

Over a half-dozen Fortune 500 companies have chosen to headquarter themselves in Philadelphia alone. A list of such corporations includes billion-dollar firms such as:

• Cencora (formerly AmerisourceBergen): $294 billion in revenue in 2024

• Comcast: $123.7 billion in 2024

• Lincoln National Corp. (Radnor-based): $18.4 billion

A 2019 city audit estimated that over ten years, Keystone Opportunity Zone-related tax abatements in Philadelphia alone totaled $627 million, or nearly three times SEPTA's yearly operating deficit.

For its part, the TWU has largely reduced its activities to serving as SEPTA's lobbyist, organizing weekly pilgrimages to the state capital in the lead-up to the budget deal to beg Democratic and Republican lawmakers to spare change from the state's increasingly limited public funding resources. Above all, it works as a brake on the struggles of its members who face increasing financial hardship and threats to their safety on the job.

The SEPTA workers' struggle emerges amid a broader assault on social programs at the national and international level. The federal shutdown, enacted by the Republican Party under the fascist Trump regime with the complicity of the Democrats, saw the government weaponizing hunger as a means of terrorizing the population. At the same time, immigration agents have flooded cities across the country as the Trump government moves toward enacting martial law.

In late October, the Philadelphia *Inquirer* published an article titled "How an ICE shake-up will bring Chicago-level terror to Philly" by opinion columnist Will Bunch. The article notes the stationing of various officials associated with America's border police in major cities, stating "[there are powerful signals] that this it-can't-happen-here surge of masked and heavily armed state terror that has turned life in Chicago upside down is coming to Philadelphia — and at least a half dozen other major U.S. cities — very soon."

It notes that "Philadelphia's acting local chief of ICE has been forced out. It's one piece of a nationwide shakeout seeking to amp up raids toward Trump's mass deportation goal of a million arrests and expulsions this year."

Within this context, the TWU leaders' attempts to stifle the mobilization of working people is downright criminal. It emerged only a few months after workers in the city government launched a powerful strike that brought all essential services to a halt. The strike, which impacted critical services like water and sanitation in the middle of summer, attracted mass support and threatened the Democratic city government of mayor Cherelle Parker.

The strike was sabotaged by the AFSCME District Council 33 and District Council 47 leaderships, who at first separated the blue-collar DC 33 workers from the white-collar workers in DC 47, despite both groups having their contracts expire simultaneously. Then, DC 33 announced a sellout tentative contract for blue-collar workers intended only to get them back to work, meeting none of their demands and offering a pay raise only one percent more than the city offer they previously rejected.

It is critical that Philadelphia transit workers draw lessons from these betrayals and the workers' efforts to fight back. The Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee, formed in the wake of the DC 33 betrayal of the municipal strike, was formed to expand the strike and build a powerful movement among workers across the city and beyond against the attempts to subordinate their fight to the Democratic Party, which runs the city, and the union bureaucracy which aids it.

The committee wrote in its founding statement in July: "We are not just fighting for ourselves. The city is imposing massive cuts across the board—$300 million slashed from the school budget and a 'doomsday' financial plan for SEPTA, which the transit board itself admitted would permanently degrade the system. These conditions are mirrored in every major city in America, including in Chicago, where 'doomsday' cuts are also being prepared; and in Los Angeles, where the Democratic city council has declared a 'fiscal emergency.'"

We call on SEPTA workers to take the initial step to contact the World Socialist Web Site and join the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee to begin taking control of their own fight.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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