

Philadelphia transit and trade union officials announce tentative agreement to keep workers on the job days before Christmas

Nick Barrickman
9 December 2025

Negotiators for the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 234 and the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) announced a tentative agreement on Monday, aimed at heading off a strike by over 5,000 SEPTA transit workers in Philadelphia. Transit workers in Pennsylvania's most economically important region have been laboring without a contract for more than a month.

After holding a strike authorization vote on November 16 under conditions of mounting rank-and-file anger, TWU officials deliberately kept workers on the job, demobilizing their power while openly collaborating with management and the state.

"I am very pleased that we were able to settle without a strike," said TWU 234 President Will Vera in a public statement following the announcement. Vera singled out Pennsylvania Democratic Governor Josh Shapiro for special praise, stating the latter had "got key people from both sides in the same room last night, stopped the run-around, got promises from both sides and we reached a deal. Without the Governor's intervention, we would have been on strike this morning."

After the expiration of their one-year contract on November 7, the TWU 234 leadership kept members guessing about what would come next. Only after mounting pressure from below did the leadership formally call a strike authorization vote more than a week later on November 16, when members voted unanimously for a strike.

The announcement comes just a few days after TWU officials declared a strike to be "imminent." On Friday, Vera declared that his "patience has run out" and the TWU International President John Samuelson joined the local leadership at a press conference. However, the statements were followed by a weekend of negotiations in which Governor Shapiro was said to be "closely" involved. On Sunday, the transit union and management officials were apparently on good terms again and the "imminent" threat of a work stoppage was called off.

Far from a near-miss, the transit union officialdom knew a deal was at hand, deciding to issue pompous threats in order to make the impending deal appear to be the product of their so-called "militant" posturing. Similar farces have occurred in

recent times, such as the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers' series of "strike ready" events, which preceded the announcement of a sellout contract in August. These were modeled on the Teamsters' own "strike ready" campaign at UPS, which it used to help force through a contract under suspicious circumstances in 2023.

The tentative agreement (TA) is a blatant sellout of the membership, which has had zero say on the terms and conditions of their employment throughout the entire ordeal. The TA's ratification has been presented to the membership and public as a done deal. This is despite the fact a ratification date has not even been set. "What have we lost? Because we definitely lost something as usual!" stated one SEPTA worker on social media in response to the union's announcement on Monday.

The TA covers two years instead of the recent one-year contracts that SEPTA and the union leaders have implemented after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the drop-off in transit ridership. Contrary to Vera's claim that the present TA will "make a SEPTA job attractive again," the two subsequent pay raises of 3.5 percent each in the contract hardly make up for the rising cost of living throughout the region. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, regional inflation has been 17 percent since 2022, while pay raises during the same time have barely kept pace.

The union released a misleading statement on social media, promising "an increase in pension benefits." However, the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) states: "The monthly pension benefit (\$94/\$100 calculation) shall be increased by six percent (6%) for employees who retire on or after January 1, 2026 and prior to November 7, 2027." This means the meager increased retirement benefit will be restricted to workers retiring in the next two years.

In addition, the TA offers slightly looser rules on vacation time and staffing, codifying certain limits on the number of workers who can take off during the summer rather than leaving the choice entirely to station managers. A side letter requires SEPTA management to bargain with the union leadership on reassignments and redundancies if automated

services are implemented, but does not guarantee that workers will keep their jobs if this occurs.

All of the minor perks of the present TA, if adopted, are imperiled by the ongoing budget crisis at SEPTA. While the recent infusion of cash from the state government is supposed to sustain the transit system for the next two years, it is more than likely that the crisis will re-emerge, as numerous public officials have stated that using the state's maintenance funds to sustain operations will weaken the service in the longer run.

The unanimous strike authorization reflects growing militancy within the working class. Philadelphia in particular has been at the epicenter of growing working-class anger on the United States East Coast. Five months ago, 9,000 city municipal workers launched a powerful eight-day strike that brought city services to a standstill, upending the city amid a heat wave and the lucrative July 4 Independence Day holiday celebration.

Only with the combined efforts of the AFSCME District Council 33 leadership, the city's Democratic Party government and the trade union bureaucracy was the strike corralled and isolated. Despite popular support from the city's working population, workers were offered a TA that met none of their demands and only gave them a raise 1 percent higher than the offer they had rejected when they went on strike.

Following this, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers rammed through a sellout in August right before the contract for 14,000 public school teachers expired. Teachers were given one two-hour Zoom call in which criticism of the TA was suppressed before a vote was called. This was a deliberate move to ensure the contract's ratification and keep the workforce from striking.

Since then, the School District of Philadelphia has advanced plans to close or co-locate a substantial portion of its 300 public schools. In November, the school district announced it would delay the plan's release until it could receive more community feedback. SDP superintendent Tony Watlington has previously declared plans to "rightsized" the school district, a euphemism for closing "underperforming" schools.

The looming financial crises in both the school and transit systems will only be exacerbated by the cuts the Trump administration is planning in federal funding. The suppression of the class struggle by the union bureaucracy has only opened the door for Trump to press ahead with his war against the social and democratic rights of the working class.

Following the municipal strike, the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee, an independent workers' organization which emerged to oppose the union officials' betrayal, stated "union leaders' number one priority is protecting their relationships with Democrats and proving their reliability to management, not securing real gains for workers."

In addition to the growth of the class struggle, union bureaucrats and their Democratic Party bosses want to suppress any opposition to the growth of dictatorship, represented most

clearly by the fascistic Trump administration. In recent months the administration has called out the National Guard in a half-dozen cities while sending its Customs and Border Patrol thugs to terrorize working class communities.

In November, the administration carried out a shakeup in its ICE field offices, promoting officials associated with Customs and Border Patrol into these positions, including in Philadelphia. The American Civil Liberties Union called this promotion "dangerous," given "Border Patrol's culture of abuse, its track record on use of force, its lack of experience in the nation's interior, and its apparent disdain for accountability and the rights of even U.S. citizens."

As the WSWs has commented, the defense of immigrant workers is integral to the defense of the working class as a whole. The union bureaucracy's efforts to suppress workers' strikes in turn assist the ruling class's turn toward dictatorship.

It is a burning need for SEPTA workers to oppose this TA, organizing in rank-and-file committees to enforce its rejection. But voting "no" is only the beginning. The rank and file must take the initiative out of the hands of the TWU leadership.

As the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Committee wrote last August: "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."

Such a struggle will necessarily bring workers into conflict with the capitalist state, including the Democratic Party, which runs both the city and the state. This is most of all reflected by the Shapiro administration's decision to get involved in the SEPTA talks. It is critical that workers mobilize wider sections of their class to deepen their struggle and prepare for a direct confrontation with the capitalist state, the enforcer of inequality and poverty.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact