

# Philadelphia Electric Company workers launch strike for the first time in history on July 4 weekend

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More than 1,500 Philadelphia Electric Company (PECO) workers went on strike July 4, the first walkout in the utility's 145-year history, as Philadelphia and the surrounding region marked the Independence Day holiday under a punishing heat wave.

Striking on the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, in the very city where independence was declared, underscores that the revolutionary conflict of the present is the struggle of the working class against capitalism.

The walkout by members of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 614, whose contract expired on March 31, has brought linemen, gas workers, mechanics and call-center employees onto the picket lines after months of talks over wages, pensions, retirement medical benefits and the demand for a unified contract.

PECO workers are confronting not only a profitable corporation but the entire political and corporate establishment in southeastern Pennsylvania, where PECO remains parent company Exelon's dominant electric and gas utility. The walkout began only days after Sheraton Philadelphia Downtown workers, represented by UNITE HERE Local 274, ended a nine-day strike after reaching a tentative agreement timed to restore hotel operations before the July 4 holiday.

The strike revolves around basic questions: pay, pensions and retirement security. The union has stated it wants "fair wages that meet industry standards" along with the restoration of a universal pension plan and retirement benefits. PECO and Exelon eliminated or reduced pensions for workers hired after 2021, creating a tier system that the workers want abolished.

In seeking to justify its opposition to the demands, the

company has cited high earnings for some linemen, which is in fact driven by overtime. However, this only reflects the dependence of workers on grueling hours to maintain decent living standards rather than any genuine prosperity.

Utility workers face the same relentless rise in living costs confronting the entire working class. MIT's 2026 Living Wage Calculator puts a bare-bones living wage for a single adult in Philadelphia County at \$23.34 an hour, or roughly \$48,500 a year, while a separate analysis of what it takes to "live comfortably" in the city placed the figure at about \$92,700 annually, roughly \$44.58 an hour.

PECO management brags that it prepared extensive strikebreaking operations to continue service. Company spokesperson Candice Womer said customers should not expect delays or interruptions because "Our customers can be assured that we have comprehensive contingency plans in place to maintain safe and reliable service under any circumstance."

Other company officials said PECO would "seamlessly pull the trigger" on plans using management personnel and outside resources to maintain operations during the walkout.

Management has tried to abuse and intimidate striking workers on the picket line. IBEW Local 614 says three members were injured in incidents this weekend, including one worker allegedly pushed to the ground by PECO security at a facility and two others reportedly struck in vehicle incidents. PECO has denied the allegations and absurdly claimed that workers fell on their own and were not hit by vehicles.

Despite this, the union leadership has advanced no strategy to broaden the struggle across Philadelphia or

appeal directly to other sections of workers, let alone challenge the political establishment that stands behind the company. Public radio WHYY quoted Teamsters Local 107 business agent Shawn Dougherty as declaring, “This chapter of the IBEW has been very, very tolerant. Management’s guns are blazing right away.”

The IBEW apparatus is itself part of the establishment. The career of John “Johnny Doc” Dougherty, the former IBEW Local 98 boss and longtime Democratic Party fixer in Philadelphia, exposes the real social character of the apparatus. Dougherty, widely described as a political “kingmaker” in the city, was convicted in 2023 on charges related to embezzlement and corruption. Reporting at the time showed that Dougherty, in addition to stealing members’ dues, spent union money bribing Democratic Party officials and underwriting the machine politics of the Philadelphia establishment.

In 2022, the IBEW at the national level helped block a national rail strike and collaborated with the Biden administration and Congress in imposing a contract workers had opposed. The IBEW was exposed as an industrial police force for the corporations and the state rather than an organization defending workers’ rights.

Workers in the city and the country have repeatedly shown their willingness to fight. What has blocked the transformation of this potential power into victory has been the trade union apparatus, which works to contain, isolate and betray struggles.

The strike comes one year after nearly 9,000 municipal workers in AFSCME District Council 33 launched the largest city workers’ strike in almost four decades. That walkout had immense potential and mass support. Trash piled up across the city, municipal operations were disrupted, and July 4 celebrations were deeply affected as workers demonstrated their social power.

Yet after eight days, DC 33 shut the strike down and forced through a tentative agreement with a 9 percent wage increase over three years—only one percentage point better than the city’s prior offer. As the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee declared at the time, “Imposing a return to work without membership approval is a blatant violation of workers’ democratic rights and the will of the rank and file.”

The teachers’ struggle followed the same pattern. In 2025, 14,000 Philadelphia educators represented by the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers moved toward a strike, with 95 percent authorizing action. The union staged “strike ready” events and presented itself as preparing a confrontation, only to announce a tentative agreement days before the contract deadline and then ram it through in a sham vote. The union held a one-time Zoom call to discuss the TA while censoring oppositional views and suppressing real debate, forcing a snap vote at the call’s conclusion.

The betrayal resolved none of educators’ fundamental demands and helped clear the way for school closures and restructuring plans imposed by the district.

The essential lesson of all of these struggles is that workers require their own organizations, controlled from below and independent of the union bureaucracy. That perspective was advanced by the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee, formed in the wake of DC 33’s sellout.

The committee insisted that last year’s strike “proves that only genuine rank-and-file leadership and organization, independent of both the union bureaucracy and the political establishment, can meet the demands of this crisis and defend the working class in Philadelphia and beyond.”

This perspective and program must be taken up and expanded by workers throughout the region and nationally.



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