

Management, mayor threaten to break strike

Philadelphia transit workers' walkout continues

By Jerry White
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The weeklong strike by Philadelphia transit workers is continuing as management and the city's mayor have threatened to use supervisors and nonunion workers to operate subways and trolleys. Negotiations between Transport Workers Union Local 234 and the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority (SEPTA) have broken off. The strike, which began June 1, has idled the fourth largest mass transit system in the US serving 500,000 passengers a day in the city of 1.5 million.

After working without a contract for two months the 5,200 workers who operate the city's subways, trolleys and buses walked out. SEPTA is demanding 47 different concessions from workers, including the hiring of part-time workers who would be paid 65 percent of the regular wage rate without any benefits. These employees could work up to 40 hours a week and be used to replace current full-time workers. In addition, management wants to cut health, dental and prescription benefits; take away family medical coverage from injured workers; eliminate maintenance job seniority rights; cut pay for new hires by \$2.66 an hour; and have the power to immediately discharge any worker who fails a drug or alcohol test.

In addition the TWU charges that SEPTA officials are demanding the authority to shut down operations and subcontract work and services. According to the union, one plan outlined in the Phoenix management study published last spring indicates that SEPTA intends to open public bus service to competition from private companies and seeks to privatize 14.2 percent of the work force each year.

Last week management sought and received an injunction barring more than eight strikers on a picket

line. It also announced that it planned to operate buses and trains with managers and nonunion personnel. Management-level SEPTA employees have been undergoing training and making dry runs in empty trains on the subway and elevated lines.

The city's mayor, Democrat Ed Rendell, indicated that he fully supports SEPTA's strikebreaking plans. He also called management's contract offer "great" and said he sees no reason why the union is striking.

On Monday morning TWU pickets extended the strike to SEPTA's key regional rail locations which had been unaffected by the strike. The regional lines are operated by workers in other unions and SEPTA has leased more rail cars and used the train service to undermine the impact of the strike.

Striking bus driver Michael Thompkins told the press that the pickets aimed to "slow down the process, to put pressure on them to do us right." Nonstriking locomotive engineers honored the TWU workers' picket lines and refused to work. SEPTA officials immediately reacted by threatening to get a court order to force the railroad employees back to work.

Despite the inconvenience that many passengers are facing opinion polls indicate that the strikers have popular support. Many city residents are angered by the arrogance of SEPTA officials who receive high salaries and have run down the transit system while raising fares to among the highest in the country.

SEPTA officials rejected the union's offer to send its members back to work if negotiations were submitted to binding arbitration. The transit authority's general manager, John K. Leary Jr., told reporters that arbitration would turn the agency's fate over to a third party with "no real accountability" for the fare hikes,

tax increases or service cuts a contract might trigger.

The prospect that management's strikebreaking plans could provoke a major confrontation between workers and the city administration has generated concern from TWU leaders and Democratic officials on the City Council. TWU spokesman Bruce Bodner told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* it would be "dangerous because it unleashes passions that are now dormant." Some City Councilmen have distanced themselves from Rendell's statements and endorsed the call for binding arbitration. The TWU leadership, along with Philadelphia and national AFL-CIO officials, has attempted to bolster illusions in the Democratic Party and the outcome of binding arbitration. But the TWU officials' alliance with the Democratic Party has led to more than a decade of concessions and worsening conditions for both transit workers and passengers alike. In fact, the TWU officials have boasted that they have collaborated with SEPTA's cost-cutting, allowing the transit authority to "compete head-on with private operators" of shuttle buses, eliminate TWU operators and conductor's jobs by converting to one-person operation on subway trains and introducing part-time employees on some suburban lines.

The World Socialist Web Site spoke with striking workers. Randy L. Dennison, a general repairman at the Fern Rock depot, said, "SEPTA is trying to break the union and take away all of the things we have won over the years. They want to eliminate seniority rights, count long-term sick leave as vacation time, make you work peak hour morning shift at one location and then send you across the city to work your next shift. [SEPTA chief counsel David] Cohen is coming after transportation. He claims the union would accept his offer overwhelmingly if it was put to a vote. This is not true because the media is not telling the people the truth about what SEPTA is trying to do. Management will not run the subway trains as they keep threatening. First of all, they don't know how. But if they try, there will be a bloodbath."

Percy Matthews, another striker, added, "They want to privatize everything from cleaning trains, to cashiers, to mechanics. They want nearly 50 give-backs."

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