

Significant opposition as Philadelphia transit workers ratify contract

By Alan Whyte
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After a powerful strike, which shut down Philadelphia's transit system from November 1 to November 7, workers ratified an agreement last Friday between the Transport Workers Union Local (TWU) 234 and the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority by a vote of 1,982 for and 760 against.

Considering the fact that there are 4,738 union members, this means 1,996 workers—or 42 percent—abstained out of disgust. The ratification was not a vote of confidence in the TWU but a sense among workers that the union would not conduct a serious struggle to win workers' demands, which included better pensions, work conditions and opposition to health care concessions. Before the voting union officials openly worried they would not be able to get a ratification vote, but union President Willie Brown told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* if workers voted the deal down he would just go back to the bargaining table.

In a statement posted on the union web site, Brown also made it emphatically clear that more negotiations would not achieve anything more because, as he wrote in bold letters, the “[m]oney is simply not there for the taking.” He then added, “Believe me, if the money was there, we would still be on strike trying to get more of it!”

In reality, the TWU shut down the strike before November 8 Election Day to help the Democrats' get-out-the-vote campaign for Hillary Clinton in Philadelphia so as to win the pivotal state of Pennsylvania. This effort failed, however, as large numbers of workers whose conditions have only worsened under eight years of Obama, did not turn out in numbers expected by the Democrats.

The agreement provides for a wage hike of only 10.5 percent over five years, which will translate into a cut in real wages if the inflation rate goes up. Even this

insulting increase will be chewed up by the increase in health care contributions from 1 percent to 2.5 percent; plus, an increase in copays for the same medical care as before.

The contract did absolutely nothing to resolve the horrendous working conditions of workers operating vehicles without proper rest or bathroom breaks. After being forced to work under these schedules, workers will have to retire with a mere \$6,000 over the current \$30,000 pension payout per year, which can easily be an actual reduction of payout benefits depending on the yearly and accumulative increases in the cost of living. It is precisely this reality which led to the revolt against the \$30,000 pension payout cap by workers in the first place.

The betrayal by the TWU of the Philadelphia should be taken as a warning to workers in New York City where TWU Local 100 is currently negotiating a deal for 34,000 bus and subway workers. The current deal expires in mid-January.

Last week thousands of workers demonstrated in front of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) to demand a new agreement. Local 100 President John Samuelsen said considering the current rate of inflation of 1.6 percent per year he would not accept a wage agreement of less than 2 percent a year! This is in a city that has one of the highest, if not the highest, cost of living in the United States.

As with Brown, Sameulsen is restricting his demands according to what the transit agency and Democratic Party officials on the state and local level claim they can pay. In justifying the last agreement he negotiated in which NY transit workers got a mere 8 percent increase for five years, he said, the MTA was experiencing financial crunch. It now has a surplus, he maintained.

According to a report issued by the New York State comptroller, Thomas P. DiNapoli, the MTA was benefiting from increased ridership, low energy costs and low interest rates. However, he projected, due to years of long term borrowing to maintain and improve the system, a whopping debt of “\$41 billion by 2020, 43 percent more than 10 years earlier.”

In other words, transit workers and the riding public will be squeezed to ensure the massive profits of the banks and big bondholders. While trillions can be found for the banks, corporate tax cuts and the Pentagon war machine, city officials and union executives claim “there is no money” when it comes to wages, health benefits, pensions or affordable public transit.

MTA riders have paying for debt servicing through fare hikes, which according to the report, has risen 45 percent between 2007 and 2015. This is three times faster than the rate of inflation and six times faster than the increase of the average salaries.

On the same day that the TWU Local 100 held its rally, the MTA announced plans for a 4 percent increase both for the fare on its buses and trains and tolls on its tunnels and bridges effective in March 2017. And as the MTA-TWU contract deadline approaches, the media will do everything in its power, as it always does, to divide the transit workers from the riders by blaming the fare hikes on employee wages and benefits. The TWU is complicit in this effort and opposed to any common fight of transit workers and the working-class and middle-class transit users against the corporate and political establishment.

The TWU is allied with the Democratic Party, which from Obama on down has led the assault on the wages, health and pension benefits of workers, with the full complicity of the unions. In a statement on the election of Trump, Philadelphia TWU leader Brown declared, “Starting on January 20, 2017, Local 234 and other unions will be confronted by a US President who is determined to destroy the labor movement and a Republican Congress ready to back him up.”

His statement, which deliberately conceals the role of the Democrats in attacking workers and paving the way for Trump’s election, is nothing but empty bluster. The AFL-CIO and the United Auto Workers have already signaled their willingness to collaborate with Trump and praised his reactionary “American-First”

nationalism.

TWU International President Harry Lombardo told a New York rally that the election was “a game changer” and that “we must remain united in our fight to hold the new administration accountable...investing...in public transit...protecting organizing and collective bargaining rights...”

The claim that the Trump—who will lead the most far-right government in the history of the United States—can be “held accountable” to protect workers’ interests is a fraud. This is only aimed at disarming workers by boosting illusions that the Democratic Party will fight Trump. Now the Democrats, including Sanders—who was endorsed by TWU Local 110 during the primaries—have all pledged to collaborate with Trump to make his presidency “successful.”

The struggle to defend workers’ living standards and the right to high quality and affordable public transportation is a political struggle, which boils down to the question of who will decide how society’s resources are to be allocated. If public interests are to take precedence over private profit, the working class must be organized as a politically independent force. This means rejecting the pro-corporate unions and their alliance with the Democrats, and building a powerful political movement against Trump, the two big business parties and the capitalist system they defend.

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