

Poverty and Declining Real Wages in America: Philadelphia Municipal Strike Highlights Worsening Plight of the Working Class

AFSCME District Council 33 represents the lowest paid public sector employees

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An eight-day strike by municipal employees in Philadelphia disrupted the operations of one of the largest cities in the United States amid systematic attacks on the interests and status of working people.

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) District Council 33 is the largest city union and is composed of the most exploited public workers.

Sanitation, airport maintenance and other workers withholding their labor created a public health crisis in Philadelphia. Garbage remained piled up for more than a week while other tasks carried out by municipal workers went undone.

In solidarity with the DC 33 strike, artists such as LL Cool J cancelled their scheduled appearance in the city. The actions of the 9,000-member union have signaled the willingness of the organized working class to exercise its power to wage a struggle surrounding the deteriorating social conditions of the people.

The union demanded a 24 percent pay increase and enhanced benefits. The tentative agreement announced on July 9, which allowed the workers to return to their jobs, offered far less than originally requested.

In a report from the local affiliate of CBS News, [it says that](#):

“Philadelphia Mayor Cherelle Parker said the tentative deal includes 3% raises each year for the next three years. It also adds a fifth step in the salary scale of 2% that will benefit union members with long enough records of service. Parker said the salary increase will take effect now, and that half of DC 33’s membership will qualify for it. By the end of the deal, 80% of the union’s members will be eligible for the fifth-step increase. The deal also comes with a \$1,500 bonus in the first year. The city says the deal on the table will cost \$115 million. Parker said union members will have been given a total of 14% in pay increases over her first term, more than any other mayor.”

Nonetheless, the reality is that the city of Philadelphia in 2024 was cited as the most impacted by the rate of inflation. The prices for housing, food, energy and other essential commodities and services have manifested into a deeper problem for working families. See [this](#).

Rising Cost of Living in Philadelphia

Under such circumstances it is not surprising that the AFSCME District Council 33 would go on strike aiming to win concessions for their membership. One source indicates that the cost of living in Philadelphia is 5 percent higher than the national average. See [this](#).

The cost of a one-bedroom apartment in the city can vary depending upon which neighborhood the buildings are located. Outside the central city, a one-bedroom apartment could run as much as \$1,300 per month.

In the central city, the cost for a one-bedroom is over \$1,900 per month. A three-bedroom apartment in the central areas of the municipality could run as high as \$3,100.

For those seeking to buy a condo or home, the median price is approximately \$450,000. Utility prices are also higher than the national average with an estimated cost of \$250 per month.

In addition, grocery prices in Philadelphia are higher than the national average with a single person spending approximately \$280 during the course of the month. The prices for food in the U.S. was a major issue during the national elections in 2024. The Trump campaign promised to lower grocery prices immediately, easing the rise in the cost of living for working families.

Yet, of all the executive orders signed by Trump, none of these have resulted in the lowering of grocery prices, rents, mortgages, utilities, transportation, education and healthcare. In the U.S. real wages have been on the decline for several decades despite claims of recent gains in pay in comparison to the official rate of inflation. Moreover, the gap between working people and the wealthy has widened exponentially for many years. See [this](#).

Philadelphia is the sixth largest municipality in the U.S. Trends in the city related to income and the cost of living have national implications. Overall, the minimum wage in the U.S. has not been raised by the Congress since 2009, some sixteen years ago. Although some states have raised their minimum wages, on a federal level it remains at \$7.25.

[According to one source](#) on the situation in Philadelphia:

“Philadelphia is the poorest big city in America. A part of lifting people out of poverty is increasing their wages and giving them a sustainable income. The average rent in Philadelphia is \$1,700, according to the Post, while the yearly salary of someone making \$7.25 an hour is \$15,163.20. The MIT Living Wage Calculator estimated that a single adult needs to earn \$34,128 to make ends meet and a single adult with one child needs to make \$71,654. Increasing the minimum wage can not only boost people’s pockets but also their morale. Not having the stress of living paycheck to paycheck could help an employee focus on their work and not on making ends meet and having a livable wage can increase retention rates. Higher wages also mean that consumers have more money to spend and that can have a positive impact on the economy.”

AFSCME District Council 33 **President Greg Boulware** said in a press conference on July 10 that the workers were determined to receive at least a 15 percent pay increase over a period of three years. He noted that if the members did not ratify the tentative agreement, they are prepared to resume their walk out.

“I don’t feel like we’ve gotten enough,” Boulware told members of the media. “Quite honestly, I’ll probably never feel that way.” See [this](#).

This municipal workers’ strike reflects the rising anger on the part of union members throughout the country. The passage of the recent federal legislation which will provide enormous tax breaks for the rich along with increases in defense and security spending to the detriment of working people and the impoverished, will only result in more mass resentment among the majority of people in the U.S.



ATTENTION

**DISTRICT COUNCIL 33 HAS REACHED A TENTATIVE
THREE-YEAR AGREEMENT WITH THE CITY OF
PHILADELPHIA. IN-PERSON RATIFICATION VOTING WILL
TAKE PLACE IN THE CAFETERIA AT 3001 WALNUT ST**

MONDAY, JULY 14, 2025, TO SUNDAY, JULY 20, 2025

**VOTES WILL BE COUNTED ON MONDAY, JULY 21, 2025.
RESULTS WILL BE MADE AVAILABLE THE SAME DAY.
VOTING HOURS ARE LISTED BELOW.**

**MONDAY TO FRIDAY: 7:00 AM TO 6:00 PM
SATURDAY: 8:00 AM TO 4:00 PM
SUNDAY: 8:00 AM TO 4:00 PM**

***YOU MUST PRESENT VALID IDENTIFICATION TO VOTE**

Other Strike Actions Among Sanitation Workers

A protracted sanitation workers strike against Republic Services has caused the piling up of millions of tons of garbage in Southern California, Boston, Metro Atlanta and Youngstown. This strike was prompted by the failure of Republic Services to raise wages and implement improved working conditions through better healthcare services and pensions.

In a report on the nationwide strike of Teamster workers, [it says](#):

“Impacting over two million LA residents, as reported by FOX LA, the labor dispute not only burdens municipalities with refuse but also highlights a critical provision in the

Teamsters' contract. This provision, contested by Republic Services, authorizes workers to engage in nationwide strikes. Following this clause, thousands of workers refuse to cross picket lines in solidarity with their Boston counterparts since the strike's commencement on July 1."

Teamsters General President Sean M. O'Brien blamed the corporations for the social and public health crises created due to the strike. [A July 14 report published by the Los Angeles Times](#) quoted O'Brien as emphasizing:

"'Republic Services has been threatening a war with American workers for years — and now, they've got one,' said Teamsters General President Sean M. O'Brien in a statement that accused Republic of underpaying rank-and-file employees while lavishing executives with multimillion-dollar compensation packages. 'The Teamsters have had it with Republic. We will flood the streets and shut down garbage collection in state after state.'"

These strikes among municipal workers in Philadelphia and the Teamsters across several regions of the U.S. portend much for the future of the labor movement. Workers, even those represented by labor unions, are continuing to fall behind in salaries, benefits and social wages.

In the U.S. there is no political party which effectively represents the working class and the nationally oppressed. The economic policies of both the Democrats and Republicans have only lowered the standards of living among the majority of people living inside the country.

The arduous task of building a party of the proletariat and the oppressed provides the only glimpse of hope for reversing the current situation. Such a formation would be positioned to fight back against the worsening conditions of the people, the imposition of fascism and the heightened threats of imperialist war.

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