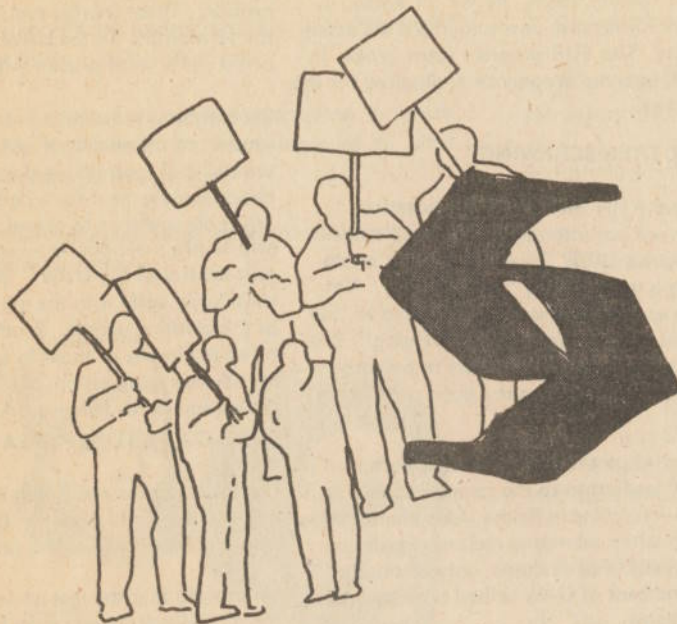


THE SEPTA STRIKE — An Analysis

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TWU Leadership Took Septa Workers for a Ride



--by JOE LEWANDOWSKI

On May 8th it became clear that Ned LeDonne, president of TWU Local 234, had taken his membership for a long and costly ride. After a 44 day strike, and a loss of about \$1,700 in wages for SEPTA workers, the TWU membership voted to accept an offer that was nearly a carbon copy of the pact that was overwhelmingly rejected on March 23.

The ratified contract provides 60 cents over two years, the same amount as in the rejected offer -- but the up front money was increased a nickel, from 32 cents to 37 cents. An additional cost-of-living raise was added and a holiday was subtracted. It was basically just a case of shuffling a few figures to help LeDonne save face and get a "yes" vote.

No one was fooled by the new contract, but the SEPTA workers had suffered the loss of six paychecks and there was absolutely no sign that the union leadership was capable of fighting for a good contract.

The blame for this defeat must sit squarely on the shoulders of TWU president LeDonne. LeDonne, surprised and shaken by the sound defeat of his initial contract proposal, at first gave some nominal support to the wage and working condition demands of the rank and file. But as the weeks wore on it became clear that LeDonne was just sitting on his hands waiting for the strike to wear his membership down!

LeDonne didn't take on Rizzo. When Frank said that the SEPTA workers could stay out till hell freezes over, LeDonne rolled over and played dead. When Rizzo chewed him out for a city hall rally that was organized by the rank and file, LeDonne practically got down on his knees to beg for forgiveness. The newspapers reported him as saying nervously afterwards, "If we get that guy mad at us, we're through."

LeDonne made no effort whatsoever to rally public support for the strike. Responding to rank and file plans to drum up community support for the strike, LeDonne said, "To get the public

on our side at this point is really a lost cause." But one worker who was active in the Committee for a Decent Contract told the *Organizer*, "The support was there. All he had to do was pick up the phone. We (the Committee) contacted a group of ministers in the Black community and the leaders of many community organizations. They told us that they were with us and would give us public support if LeDonne would just ask for it."

Rizzo was content to sit out the strike because he realized that public transportation serves mostly Black and Latin people, students and the elderly, and the lower income working class -- the groups which are the furthest removed from political power. The key, therefore, to winning the strike was in organizing an alliance of workers and commuters which would combine the demands for no fare hikes, the restoration of previously cut-back service, and clean and safe transportation with the economic demands of the SEPTA workers.

In the last analysis, SEPTA won because its racist practices were successful in dividing both workers and commuters. LeDonne's racism and his fear of Rizzo kept his hands tied and played right into management's game.

LeDonne made no effort to draw on support from other union locals. Whenever a union gets a good contract, it makes it that much easier for other unions to get similar or better provisions in their contracts. By the same token, a defeat like that sustained by the SEPTA workers hurts all trade union locals in the city. It is therefore in the interest of all workers to help each other. This is called labor solidarity and should be a basic principle of trade unionism.

Labor solidarity was sadly lacking in the SEPTA strike, primarily because LeDonne made no effort to build it. For six weeks, SEPTA workers were on the street without a strike fund. Other local union leaders told members of the Committee for a Decent Contract that they would gladly take up plant gate col-

lections for the strikers, but LeDonne had not asked them to do so.

A lot could have been done through the Philadelphia labor movement to aid the strike. Education of the rank and file of other unions was needed to counter the anti-union propaganda that was widespread in the daily newspapers. There could have been joint union marches and rallies held in conjunction with community organizations to support the strikers.

The most powerful weapon would have been a general work stoppage action that could have brought Philadelphia industry to a halt until the buses started rolling again. But Le Donne didn't even take the most fundamental steps to build the labor solidarity his local so desperately needed.

LeDonne failed to organize his own membership for the strike. From the time the initial tentative agreement was reached in mid-March, Le Donne failed to keep his membership informed about the terms of the agreement. When a demonstration by a frustrated rank and file resulted in 15 suspensions, LeDonne gladly sold them down the river as troublemakers and political enemies. Despite widespread support for the suspended work-

ers, he never really made their reinstatement a contract demand.

When the membership finally did vote to go out, LeDonne retreated into his favorite taproom with his cronies and yes-men instead of running a strike. After about a week, picket lines fell apart. There was no effort to inform the membership about the progress of negotiations. The union called no rallies on its own and only participated in a city hall rally when it was forced to do so. Without leadership from the union, the members were left without a unified political direction and were left to endure the hardships of the strike the best they could as isolated individuals.

Ned LeDonne's days are numbered. This strike will be fresh in the minds of SEPTA workers when they go to the polls in a few months to elect their new leadership. Merrill Cooper, the present Secretary-Treasurer of the local, has indicated that he will probably oppose LeDonne. Joe Donato, a past officer of the local, has been running for the office since he learned to walk.

Many of the rank and file workers active in the strike aren't too happy about their choices. One member of the Committee

described Cooper as, "not much different than LeDonne, but slicker" and said that Donato is "just an opportunist, he used the strike for his own political future."

The Committee for a Decent Contract is probably still too young to capture executive board or officer spots in the coming election, but it could run a campaign on strong rank and file program and therefore influence the political direction the new leadership will take no matter who is chosen. The Committee may be more successful in winning some section officer positions which could increase and broaden their influence throughout the union.

This contract puts SEPTA workers in the worst position in memory. Not only are their wages far below the standard for transportation workers in large cities, they are also under Frank Rizzo's thumb. No leadership will be capable of releasing them from that position unless it is willing to fight city hall, build strong alliances with commuter and community forces and other labor unions, tackle the issue of racism both on the part of SEPTA and within the union, and make the TWU a democratic and fighting union.

Rank and File Needs Program, Organization and Tactics to Beat the System

-by JOE LEWANDOWSKI

The days between the strike vote on March 23 and the final settlement 44 days later were dark days for most SEPTA workers. One driver described the situation as "... being between a rock and a hard place. The money they offered wasn't enough to live on, yet the union leadership wasn't doing nothing to win the strike."

The only bright spots in the strike were provided by the rank and file SEPTA workers who played an independent and influential role for the first time in years. The principal centers of rank and file discontent were a rank and file organization called the Committee for a Decent Contract, which drew supporters from most of SEPTA's eleven depots, and the supporters of Joe Donato, a rival of TWU Local 234 president Ned LeDonne, most of which come from the Frankford depot.

Of these two centers, only the Committee

for a Decent Contract offered a program that could united workers with the commuter and community groups which were willing to support the strike.

The Committee called for \$1 up front, no fare hike, re-instatement of 300 laid off workers and the restoration of service cutbacks, and improved vehicle maintenance for safety as well as other demands.

The Committee was formed when the members of Driving Force, a small rank and file group with several years history, combined forces with independent rank and filers who were interested in uniting to fight for a good contract.

DEALING WITH RED-BAITING

As soon as it was formed, the Committee had to deal with red-baiting. Because of its sectarian practices, Driving Force had isolated itself from the masses of TWU's rank and file and had become further isolated by red-baiting from LeDonne and other union officials. The active members of the Committee who were not Driving

Force members understood that red-baiting was a weapon to divide their ranks and most stood firm against it.

On a TV show aired during the strike, members of Driving Force failed to deal with the issue very well, however. When accused of being a member of the Socialist Workers Party, Driving Force leader Roger Tauss denied any such affiliation instead of attacking the issue of red-baiting head on and exposing the role it plays for the entire TV audience.

Red-baiting will continue to be an issue for the Committee if they continue as an ongoing caucus within the union. Some members confide that they would like Driving Force members to continue in the caucus, but are critical of some of their past practices. One measure of the success of the Committee in transforming itself into a caucus will be how well Driving Force members take these criticisms to heart, and how well the Committee remains firm in its principled opposition to red-baiting in any form.

CDC MUST STRUGGLE AGAINST RACISM

Another problem yet to be dealt with openly in the Committee is racism. The Committee draws most of its support from the southern depots and 80 or 90% of its supporters are Black SEPTA workers, while the leadership of the Committee is mostly white. The Committee has been unable to attract support from the predominantly white northern depots. The reason for this division is racism and anti-communism, fears that frequently go hand-in-hand.

The only way to deal with this division is to recognize that it exists, to frankly deal with it within the Committee and to find ways of winning more white workers to the Committee by winning them to the fight against racism. The Committee also has to develop more rank and file leadership, particularly from the ranks of the Black workers.

During the contract struggle, the Committee made some mistakes but generally played a positive role in fighting for a better contract. The lessons of this struggle are ones that may be of benefit to many new rank and file organizations.

On March 23, when the strike vote was taken, the situation looked like this: the contract was initially turned down because the rank and file was angry at the leadership for not providing them with enough information about the contract and 60 cents over two years was just not enough. Fifteen rank and file TWU members including some Committee for a Decent Contract activists had been given 30 day suspensions and put on final notice for shutting down the Frankford depot a week earlier.

The sentiment of the rank and file was in favor of the suspended workers and most felt that the union should make their

reinstatement a condition of any new contract. LeDonne was surprised and shaken by rank and file militance. Rizzo vowed that the SEPTA workers wouldn't get a dime more. Some community organizations were already fighting Rizzo and SEPTA about the proposed fare increases and the commuter tunnel.

The fight was obviously going to be a difficult one. Rizzo was following the pattern emerging around the country of coming down hard on public service unions. Ned LeDonne had neither the brains nor the heart for this fight.

Yet on the positive side, the rank and file was displaying a lot of heart and there were sympathetic commuter and community forces which could be enlisted into the struggle.

QUESTIONS OF RANK AND FILE TACTICS

The key to winning this fight was in forcing the union leadership to do its job -- do depot by depot strike organization, get community and labor support, broaden the issues so that the entire Philadelphia working class would bring its pressure to bear on Rizzo.

The Committee was not able to do this. There seems to have been some confusion in the Committee as to how much emphasis should be placed on forcing LeDonne's hand and how much should be placed on going it alone, playing an independent role and pressuring the union only indirectly. The balance of the activity seems to have come down on the last strategy.

The Committee held several rallies, tried to drum up financial support for the strikers, tried to organize a food buying cooperative, put out a leaflet urging a second "no" vote and organized poll watchers for the final voting day.

In a strike situation, workers are usually rightfully wary of following the lead of competing political factions within a union. They understand that a union's strength is in its unity, and are suspicious of actions which may just be based on opportunism.

Most community organizations and commuter groups and all of the sympathetic labor unions, groups whose support was critical to any sort of victory, were also wary of splitting the union's ranks by giving support to a dissident faction within the union. The Committee approached a number of union locals and community leaders -- all said that they were willing to lend support if it was requested by the union leadership.

A rank and file caucus has to tread the tightrope of unity within the union combined with principled independent action of the rank and file. If this strategy is executed correctly, a rank and file can move an entire union along the path to victory rather than just mobilizing a handful of the most militant and advanced workers.

The Committee for a Decent Contract has to take a hard look at its experience during the strike as it makes plans to continue as a caucus in the future. It should take particular care to put together a program that can unite the majority of SEPTA workers and at the same time build alliances with progressive forces in the community. In bringing about this unity, the Committee has to deal seriously with racism -- racial divisions within the SEPTA workforce and the racism in SEPTA's plan for fare hikes and service cuts which are part of an overall attack on the living standards of the national minority and working people of Philadelphia.