

SEPTA union prepares for negotiations

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WHYY

Transportation Workers Union Local 234 president Willie Brown has two words for SEPTA: "Life Happens."

As the union leader prepares to negotiate a new contract for more than 5,000 transit workers employed by the authority, Brown said he is prioritizing issues that haven't historically been front and center at the bargaining table. Those things include better paid leave policies for parents, death compensation for the families of workers who died from COVID-19, and hazard pay, in addition to the standard ask of increased wages.

"[The pandemic] actually shined light on a lot of things," said Brown, whose union represents more SEPTA workers than any other. "Even though everything has an economic background to it, [there's] things that's more important than just raises."

The authority has received close to \$1.5 billion in COVID-19 relief funds to keep the system running through the pandemic. SEPTA officials have said most of the money has gone toward labor costs. Andrew Busch, a SEPTA spokesperson, said the funds have to last the agency, which runs on a \$1.5 billion operating budget, until 2024. Ridership, though increasing as people return to offices and classrooms, remains far from pre-pandemic levels at less than 50%.

Yet union officials point to other transit agencies who have managed to extend new benefits even as ridership dropped and balance sheets suffered. For example, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority in New York City paid out \$500,000 in death benefits to the families of the more than 150 workers who died from the corona-

virus despite the economic pressures facing the agency. Meanwhile, SEPTA denied such compensation to the 11 transit workers who died of coronavirus-related causes, citing financial concerns.

"We have people dying," Brown said. "We have probably close to a thousand people who tested positive and we're still testing positive for this virus, and all you get from SEPTA is a fruit basket?"

As the two sides prepare to battle it out over their interests, the threat of a strike looms. The union has struck 12 times since 1975.

Union officials say they are not there yet. But that doesn't mean they won't be, said Brian Pollitt, TWU Local 234 vice president.

"I've been in every round of negotiations for probably the last 20 years," Pollitt said in a video. "And this, by far, is going to be the hardest based off of where we are in the world today."

Stuart Davidson, a partner at Willig, Williams and Davidson, a law firm that specializes in labor law, said negotiations across the country have been impacted by the pandemic, which "is not going anywhere anytime soon."

Issues such as hazard pay, sick leave, death benefits, better wages, and vaccines are bound to make their way to bargaining tables nationwide, said Davidson, and the nationwide worker shortage has given employees more leverage.

"Workplaces are dramatically more dangerous," said Davidson. "And it's not just the impact on a worker, but a worker has the potential and has to worry about bringing the virus home to his family or her family."

SEPTA's contract with TWU Local 234 expires Oct. 31.

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A bus leaves the Midvale depot in Nicetown, where SEPTA operates a natural gas burning generation plant.

—EMMA LEE/WHYY, FILE

Barry Elementary honors teacher



Commodore John Barry School principal KaTiedra T. Argro spoke Friday about the contributions that teacher Mark Maples made to the community as they unveiled a mural in his honor. —TRIBUNE PHOTO/ABDUL R. SULAYMAN



A ceremony to unveil a mural at Commodore Barry Elementary School at 5900 Race St. drew many from the school community to honor digital literacy teacher Mark Maples in West Philadelphia.

—TRIBUNE PHOTO/ABDUL R. SULAYMAN

Commodore John Barry Elementary School in West Philadelphia hosted a mural dedication ceremony Friday during its 2021 Open House to honor a teacher who lost his life to cancer last December. The Barry Elementary community celebrated the life of digital literacy teacher Mark Maples, who was known for his commitment to students and love for digital learning, murals and the art of music.

Texas House approves GOP voting restrictions

Eric Bradner
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The Texas House approved a raft of new voting restrictions Friday, as majority Republicans seeking to hold on to power in a rapidly changing state finally overcame months of delays by Democrats who said the measure will raise new barriers to the ballot box for marginalized voters.

The House voted 80-41 to approve Senate Bill 1. It now moves back to the state Senate to iron out minor differences with the House's version of the bill before heading to the desk of Republican Gov. Greg Abbott, whose strong-arm tactics — including calling lawmakers into two special sessions this summer with instructions to approve "election integrity" measures after the Democratic boycott had stymied earlier versions — paved the way for the bill's passage.

Opponents warned that the bill would make voting harder for people of color, who often back Democrats, as well as people with disabilities — in part by outlawing the all-night drive-thru voting that Houston conducted during the 2020 election.

"Make no mistake: This is your bill. Your idea. And you



Speaker of the House Dade Phelan, R-Orange, right, talks with Rep. Toni Rose, D-Balch Springs, as the House debates election bill SB1, on Thursday in Austin, Texas. —AP PHOTO/ERIC GAY

would be responsible for the consequences," Democratic state Rep. Senfronia Thompson, who recalled having to pay a poll tax to vote in Texas prior to 1966, said to her Republican colleagues. "If you think that you're winning today by the things that you are putting in this bill, let me give you a prophetic statement: You will reap what you sow. And you know what? It won't be years or decades from now. It'll be sooner than you think."

Friday's vote caps off this

summer's showdown over voting rights, with Republicans in legislatures across the nation seeking to implement new restrictions in the wake of former President Donald Trump's lies about widespread fraud in the 2020 election.

Texas Democrats are now in the same position as Georgia, Florida and other states that have similarly approved restrictive voting laws this year: dependent on the party's national leaders to find a

way past a Senate filibuster and enact nationwide voter protections.

Texas House Democrats had tried for months to halt the GOP's bill. In the waning hours of Texas' legislative session in May, House Democrats bolted from the Capitol in Austin to block the chamber from having the quorum necessary to do business — effectively running out the clock and blocking the bill's passage.

Then, when Abbott called a 30-day special session to

try again, those House Democrats fled to Washington, D.C. — outside the reach of Republican Speaker Dade Phelan's order to have them arrested and compelled back into the House chamber to vote. The Democrats spent weeks in Washington organizing a pressure campaign to persuade members of Congress to pass federal voting rights protections, which remain stalled on Capitol Hill.

The six-week exodus ended after Abbott called

a second special session and some Democrats broke ranks and returned to Austin, clearing the path for Republicans to move the measure in the House.

Much of SB 1 targets the efforts of Harris County, the home of Houston, to make voting more accessible during the pandemic last year. The county opened drive-thru voting centers and allowed 24-hour early voting — both of which the bill would prohibit, because it creates a window of 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. in which counties are allowed to conduct early voting.

It prohibits local elections officials from sending unsolicited applications to vote by mail, including to voters over the age of 65 who are automatically eligible to cast mail-in ballots.

It also places new rules around mail-in voting, increases protections for partisan poll watchers and sets new limits on those who help voters, including those with disabilities, to cast their ballots.

The Republican bill authors have repeatedly said the legislation is designed to make it "easier to vote, harder to cheat." There is no evidence of widespread voting fraud in Texas.

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