Philadelphia transit workers strike against negro workers, 1944

- local community or neighborhood-level campaign [1]

**Timing**
1 August 1944 to: 7 August 1944

**Location and Goals**
Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Goals:
"We won't go back to work until they take the Negroes off." - Frank Carney

**Methods**

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 105. Establishment strike
- 106. Industry strike
- 112. Reporting "sick." (sick-in)

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 105. Establishment strike
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 105. Establishment strike
Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 105. Establishment strike
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 105. Establishment strike
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 105. Establishment strike
- 106. Industry strike

Notes on Methods:
Since the Philadelphia Transit Company was essentially the only transit operator in Philadelphia, this strike was classified as both an establishment strike and an industry strike

Segment Length:
1 day

Classifications
Classification:
Defense
Cluster:
Democracy
Group characterization:

- White transit workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites
Leaders:
Frank Carney, former president of the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Employees Union; James H. McMenamin, chairman of the strikers' committee; James Dixon; Frank Thompson

Partners:
Philadelphia Rapid Transit Employees Union (PRTEU)

External allies:
Not known
Involvement of social elites:
Joining/exiting order of social groups
Groups in 1st Segment:
Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Additional notes on joining/exiting order:
No known joining order
Segment Length:
1 day

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence
Opponents:
Philadelphia Transit Company
Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known
Campaigner violence:
Threatened to physically attack strike breakers
Repressive Violence:
US Army soldiers threatened to use force on the strikers to break the strike

Success Outcome
Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
0 points out of 6 points
Survival:
0 points out of 1 point
Growth:
3 points out of 3 points
Total points:
3 out of 10 points

During the first week of August 1944, employees of the Philadelphia Transit Company (PTC) effectively shut down the city's transit system, defying both the federal government and their own union. The strike, which lasted for six days and halted much of the city's war production, was in response to a PTC decision to promote eight African Americans to the position of trolley car driver. Throughout the decade leading up to this "hate strike," African Americans had demanded that the PTC hire them as bus and trolley drivers, motormen and conductors, and station cashiers. Leading up to August 1944, however, PTC refused to hire new African American employees and all of the company's 537 existing black workers were restricted to menial and backbreaking jobs in the ways and maintenance divisions. They primarily worked as porters and messengers and were not permitted to interact with the public. Many transit companies around the country employed the same discriminatory hiring practices. The PTC system, which was partly city-owned, was one of the largest
transit systems in the country, carrying 2,500,000 passengers daily.

On March 14, 1944, in a hotly contested race, Philadelphia's transportation workers elected the Transport Workers Union (TWU), Local 234, an affiliate of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), as their official bargaining agent. During the campaign, the TWU promised to make racial equality a central pillar of contract negotiations. The former bargaining agent, the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Employees Union (PRTEU), had close ties to the company and supported its racist hiring practices. The PRTEU contract expired on April 11, 1944, and as contract talks with the TWU dragged on for months, the PTC received pressure to integrate its workforce from both the federal Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) and the TWU. The PTC ignored this pressure, providing the excuse that it wanted to await a new TWU contract.

Early in July 1944, the War Manpower Commission (WMC) ruled that the PTC must abide by the policies of the United States Employment Service (USES), which prohibited hiring discrimination based on race, creed or national origin. On July 7, 1944, in response to the WMC ruling, the PTC posted notices in all of its car barns, stating that it would abide by the ruling. On July 27, 1944, the PTC promoted eight of its existing African American employees to trolley car drivers. The eight began training for their new jobs that day and were to take their first training trolleys on the streets of Philadelphia on August 1.

During the week after the PTC made this announcement, the Philadelphia branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) started to receive reports that old PRTEU loyalists within the PTC workforce were holding meetings on company property, during which they talked about striking if African Americans were upgraded to trolley car drivers. Loyal members of the TWU were barred from participating in these meetings. The NAACP contacted PTC board chairman Dr. Arthur Mitten and inquired about these meetings. Dr. Mitten gave no response. Also, during that week, notices appeared in PTC car barns, stating that PTC employees would refuse to work alongside African Americans. Company employees also received phone calls to the same effect.

The strike began at 4 a.m. on Tuesday, August 1, 1944. Workers originally claimed that they were "too sick" to work, but soon a committee claiming to represent the strikers admitted that the work stoppage was in protest of the PTC's decision to promote the African Americans. Representatives from every PTC car barn were on this committee, which met throughout the strike and was chaired by elevated train operator James H. McMenamin. Trolley car operator James Dixon, bus driver Frank Thompson, and former PRTEU president Frank Carney, who was not employed by the PTC, were also leaders of the strike.

Within a few hours of the start of the strike, the local branch of the NAACP had notified the organization's national office with the news and requested their support. By 9 a.m., the national office had sent telegrams to President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the chair of the WMC, Paul V. McNutt, calling for immediate federal intervention. By noon, 4,500 PTC workers had struck, and all of the scheduled 2,600 transit vehicles were idle.

The local office of the NAACP became a central organizing hub for the campaign against the strike, and many community organizations, both black and white, worked tirelessly to quell the escalating racial tensions in the city. The local NAACP distributed 100,000 leaflets, urging people to "treat other people as you would be treated." The national office of the NAACP sent the organization's National Assistant Secretary to Philadelphia to aid in the organizing process.

At 2 p.m., the local office of the NAACP received a report that the PTC had printed notices announcing that the company planned to revoke its earlier decision to promote the eight African Americans. Two hours later, and after leaders of numerous Philadelphia-based community organizations crowded PTC's offices, Dr. Mitten announced that, although the notices had been printed, they would not be used.
On that first day of the strike, 3,000 PTC employees gathered in a PTC car barn and shouted their determination to remain off the job until the promotion of the African Americans was revoked. Throughout the weeklong strike, Philadelphia's newspapers and radio stations editorialized their opposition to the principles driving the strike. The vast majority of letters to the editor and phone calls to the local offices of the NAACP and the FEPC were in opposition to the strike. The leaders of the strike preached discrimination, but the overwhelming attitude of Philadelphia residents was one of understanding and inclusion.

Racial tensions escalated throughout the day and remained high during the weeklong strike. Despite the fact that Philadelphia Mayor Bernard Samuel was not avidly opposed to the strike, the city police department can be credited for maintaining order and preventing a racial riot. After the strike began, it became unsafe for African Americans to travel in some white sections of the city. The windows of white shop owners were smashed, and a group of whites driving in a black neighborhood shot a 13-year-old African American girl without warning. The highest amounts of racially motivated violence in the city occurred the night after the strike began and the following morning.

By nightfall of the first day of the strike, U.S. Army production of war materials in Philadelphia was cut in half due to the transit stoppage, and Navy production diminished by 70%. During normal operation, the PTC carried 300,000 war workers each day.

Since the TWU, the recognized bargaining agent for the PTC workers, opposed the strike, the union had not violated the Smith-Connally Act, which forbade strikes on war production industries during wartime. Consequently, the situation in Philadelphia was referred directly to President Roosevelt for his intervention. Roosevelt, knowing that Philadelphia was the third-largest war production city in the country and that the strike had practically paralyzed the city, authorized the U.S. Army to take control of the PTC system on Thursday, August 3. Roosevelt delegated Army oversight of the situation to Major General Philip Hayes, of the War Department, who issued a statement, requiring PTC workers to return to work or face conscription into the Army. The Army seized control of the transit system that Thursday night.

The following day, Friday, August 4, the committee claiming to represent the now 6,000 PTC employees on strike met for the third day and unanimously approved continuing the strike until PTC revoked its decision to promote the eight African American workers.

On Saturday, August 5, President Roosevelt sent 5,000 heavily armed soldiers into Philadelphia to crush the strike by whatever means necessary. The Army set up encampments in Fairmount Park and brought in ammunition, including machine guns. The troops prepared to conduct pre-enlistment medical evaluations of those PTC workers who refused to report to work. Also on that Saturday, the WMC issued a statement indicating that any PTC workers who did not report to work on Monday morning and who were not genuinely sick would lose their jobs. The WMC statement also indicated that workers who continued the strike on Monday would become ineligible for any other WMC jobs and would not receive unemployment compensation.

Limited PTC service on Philadelphia's subway-surface lines resumed at 5 a.m. on Saturday. Twelve hours later, 187 of the scheduled 2,063 vehicles were in operation, but all service halted again by midnight. PRTEU loyalists and strike leaders physically threatened the approximately 100 PTC workers who did report to work that day. Philadelphia police arrived at PTC car barns in fifty officer squadrons to protect those PTC employees who wished to work.

Also on that Saturday, four leaders of the strike, James H. McMenamin, Frank Carney, James Dixon and Frank Thompson, were arrested on federal warrants and charged with violation of the Smith-Connally Act. The men were released on $2,500 bail each. McMenamin, who spent Saturday night in a county prison before being
released, told a crowd of 200 strikers on Sunday that they should return to work. "We will take this matter up and thresh it out in federal court," he said. He also told the crowd that he would report to work for his scheduled 4:34 a.m. run the following morning.

The strike, which was the largest racially motivated strike of the World War II era and led to the loss of over 4,000,000 man-hours in war production factories, ended on the morning of Monday, August 7, 1944. At midnight that morning, the PTC, under Army supervision, reported that 90% of all scheduled runs were in operation. The company also reported that 95% of its employees had signed cards, indicating that they would return to work Monday. The vast majority of the 6,000 PTC strikers did return to work that morning, and service continued as scheduled.

When James McMenamin arrived at the Grange Street depot for his scheduled 4:34 a.m. run, William Hunter, depot superintendent, told him that he was fired on orders of Gen. Hayes. Frank Thompson and James Dixon were also fired that day, and the Army proceeded to immediately induct the two. The Army focused on maintaining the resumed service that day and soldiers, dressed in full battle gear with steel helmets, rode on every PTC vehicle to protect drivers and passengers. The Army instructed the eight African American trainees to stay home on Monday. By Wednesday, however, seven of the eight were driving training trolleys on the streets of Philadelphia.

The Justice Department convened a Federal grand jury, which began its hearings on Wednesday, August 9. Federal District Court Judge George A. Welsh charged the jury with determining the hidden racist motives behind the strike. Also on that Wednesday, the TWU announced that it had signed a contract with the PTC that contained improvements to wages and working conditions, amounting to $3,000,000 annually.

The Army's presence on PTC vehicles continued until August 12. By this time, two of the African American trainees had started to take regular passenger trolley runs on two of Philadelphia's lines. On August 17, the Army returned control of Philadelphia's transit system to the PTC and began withdrawing troops from the city.

By September 1944, all eight African Americans were driving PTC trolleys. By October, the number of African American drivers had doubled from eight to sixteen, and within one year, there were over 900 African American drivers and conductors in the PTC system. One African American had also gotten a job in the company's public relations department.

Research Notes
Sources:


CHARLES E. EGAN. “ROOSEVELT ORDERS ARMY TO TAKE OVER PHILADELPHIA LINES.” New York Times (1923-Current file), August 4, 1944.


———. “STRIKERS GO BACK IN PHILADELPHIA; SOLDIERS ON CARS.” New York Times (1923-Current file), August 7, 1944.


“INDICATES POLITICS IN TRANSIT STRIKE.” New York Times (1923-Current file), August 10, 1944.

“INDICT 30 STRIKERS IN PHILADELPHIA.” New York Times (1923-Current file), October 5, 1944.

“PHILADELPHIA ROW SENT TO PRESIDENT.” New York Times (1923-Current file), August 3, 1944.


Additional Notes:
Edited by Max Rennebohm (24/07/2011)
Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Carl E. Sigmond, 27/04/2011

Back to top

A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.
Copyright Swarthmore College.