



On The Move

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Philadelphia Politics and the TWU, a Brief History

Let's not Jump on Kenney Bandwagon Just Yet

The winner of the Democratic Party primary, former councilman Jim Kenney, is now the presumptive mayor elect of Philadelphia. Kenney takes office in January, 2016, a big year for Local 234 and its members---the year in which the Local negotiates real pension reforms at SEPTA. With all the talk about Mayor Kenney's support for labor and his being a "pro-union" guy, it is important that TWU members understand Kenney's history, particularly his dealings or lack of dealings with Local 234.

Jim Kenney won a seat on city council in the 1991 election. Prior to that, Kenney served on the staff of State Senator Vince Fumo, a powerful figure in city and state politics at the time. Fumo backed a group of South Philly politicians who in turn served as his allies in city politics, including Philadelphia union politics. Frank DiCicco also became a councilman with the help of Vince Fumo. DiCicco served on council from 1996 to 2011 when he decided not to run for re-election. As the leading Democrat in the State Senate, Fumo played a key role in the appointment of James Schwarzman to the SEPTA Board in 1991. Schwarzman recently left the Board.

Kenney, DiCicco, Fumo and Schwarzman, all allies, were potentially key players in Local 234's dealings with SEPTA. So what did they do to assist the members of the union?

Four Strikes, But No Help from Councilman Kenney

In 1995, the SEPTA Board forced a two week strike over a contract supported by SEPTA's General Manager, Lou Gambaccini, and Deputy General Manager, Howard Roberts. Gambaccini and Roberts negotiated the contract with the Local, but Schwarzman and the rest of the SEPTA Board refused to go along, causing an entirely unnecessary strike. In 1995, Kenney did nothing to support Local 234. He didn't even call to ask if he could be of any assistance. After two weeks, the SEPTA Board caved, but vowed to prepare for a major battle with the Local in 1998, which is exactly what they did.

In 1998, SEPTA argued that our labor agreement was "antiquated" and came to the table with a completely rewritten contract, containing devastating economic, work-rule and other non-economic concessions. The SEPTA Board tried to convince the public that SEPTA would cease to exist, if the Union didn't buckle to SEPTA's demands. As reported at the time, twelve of SEPTA's 15 board members, including Schwarzman, "*stood together and raised the specter of life without SEPTA.*" The press quoted Schwarzman as saying: "We are concerned with the

authority's very existence...If we don't make the changes [demanded by SEPTA], there will be no system in the future . . .” The Local made it known that the Board was willing to risk a shutdown of several months to win radical work-rule changes, including part-time operators, along with big cuts in benefits and pay. When asked whether the SEPTA Board had the will power to hold out Schwartzman told reporters: “Absolutely.” With Local 234 under attack, Councilman Kenney stood on the sidelines, as did Councilman DiCicco, now a candidate to be Kenney’s chief of staff. The strike provoked by the SEPTA Board started on June 1, 1998 and ended forty days later.

Thirty days into the strike, the Sheet Metal Workers hosted a meeting between the parties at its union hall. After a half-hour of fruitless discussion between TWU President Steve Brookens and SEPTA’s chief negotiator Pat Battel, the President of the Sheet Metal Workers invited Senator Fumo to join the talks. Ten minutes later, Fumo threatened to break the strike by operating the Market-Frankford line and the Broad Street subway with scabs. Brookens challenged Fumo to take the matter outside. Fumo declined Brookens’ invitation and the plan to use scabs crumbled at his feet. The strike ended ten days later, with most of SEPTA’s demands tossed into the trash--but no thanks to Jim Kenney---the “union guy” was nowhere to be found for forty days and forty nights. Adding insult to injury, Kenney’s mentor, Vince Fumo, sued the Local for defamation after statements were made to the press about his role in the negotiations...yet Kenney kept silent.

In 2005 and 2009, the pattern repeated itself. Local 234 went on strike, Kenney remained invisible the entire time. Same for 2014---Kenney offered no help during contract negotiations.

Loyalty to Local 234’s Friends Must Trump Public Opinion

For many years Anthony Williams worked with Local 234 in any way he could. Williams was with the Local during contract negotiations in 2005, 2009 and 2014. He was there to support more state funding for SEPTA and he helped beat back the Republican Party’s legislative efforts to strip Local 234 of the right to strike and destroy the dues check-off system. That’s why the Executive Board supported Williams’ candidacy in the democratic primary for mayor.

Unfortunately, we now have a contingent of “contrarians” on the property. If the Local says the sky is blue, they’ll say the sky is pink. If the Local says the earth is round, they’ll argue that the earth is flat. In the primary election for mayor, some decided to buck the Union’s endorsed candidate and instead promoted Kenney’s candidacy, despite Kenney’s dreadful history with Local 234. While every union member has the right to free speech and can support any candidate they want, the problem is that the contrarians want to divide the union on *every issue*, putting the members’ interests at risk as the Local embarks on a very ambitious plan for the 2016 negotiations. Criticism is fine, in fact, it’s welcomed, but self-serving *attacks* against the Local---often based on false information---merely plays into SEPTA’s hands.

Local 234 harbors no ill-will toward Jim Kenney and we hope that he enjoys smooth sailing in November’s election. Hopefully, once in office, Kenney will prove to be a true friend of labor, including a friend of Local 234. At the same time, we intend to move forward with our eyes wide open, aware of Kenney’s history and mindful of the possibility that the hype about Kenney as a “labor guy” may prove to be wishful thinking. If we remain united, Local 234 can make big gains in 2016, with or without the support of our next mayor.