

Victimized Detroit school bus driver to be reinstated

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An arbitrator in Detroit ruled Monday that Mary Coleman, a 17-year veteran school bus driver who was fired in a thinly-veiled victimization, must be reinstated to her job and granted back pay. The arbitrator's ruling was the result of Coleman's determined struggle over the last 11 months to regain her job, and the fight taken up by the Socialist Equality Party against her political victimization.

For years management has sought a pretext to fire Coleman because of her militant defense of her coworkers. As a supporter of the SEP she has been a political opponent of the school board's budget-cutting and privatization policies, as well as of the collusion of the bus drivers union, Teamsters Local 214, with management.

Coleman was fired on August 27, 1997 for leaving a child unattended on her bus. The responsibility for this incident, however, lay not with Coleman, but with the school board, whose cutbacks have resulted in intolerable working conditions for school bus employees and dangerous conditions for students. When the incident occurred May 1, 1997, Coleman was distracted from her normal duties by an irate parent, who was angered because her small child was no longer being dropped off or picked up at home. The mother mistakenly believed Coleman was responsible for this situation, unaware that the school board had eliminated the service. The previous month a driver had been severely beaten by an angry parent in a similar incident.

In terminating Coleman the school authorities cited a July 1995 letter of understanding between the school board and Teamsters Local 214 which places the onus for unsafe conditions on the drivers and allows for their suspension or termination. In reality, the board fired Coleman in violation of the provisions of this letter, which stipulates that the first such incident will result in

a 30-day suspension. Coleman was the only worker fired for leaving a child unattended.

She was fired without a hearing or proper notification. A month later, school authorities and the union refused to allow her to present witnesses in her defense at a hearing. Despite repeated requests and a letter from her attorney subpoenaing her records, management refused to grant her access to her personnel files to prepare her case.

The vendetta continued after the firing. In an effort to prevent Coleman from collecting her unemployment benefits, school authorities claimed she had been fired because this was the second time she left a child unattended. The head personnel administrator, Robert Hollifield, testified before a state employment benefits judge that the first incident took place on April 24, 1995 and resulted in the school board paying out \$90,000 in a lawsuit.

This story was concocted from beginning to end. On April 24, 1995, the day of the alleged first incident, Coleman was not working. This was the first day of a 30-day suspension that she and eight other workers served for participating in a January 1995 protest. Hundreds of student transportation workers demonstrated that day against late paychecks and poor working conditions. Nine workers were singled out by management and Local 214 officials for firing, but a campaign waged by the Workers League, the forerunner of the SEP, won sufficient support in the working class to force management to reduce the discipline to a 30-day suspension.

The union twice rejected Coleman's appeals to arbitrate her case, siding with management's claim that she was negligent and claiming her actions exposed the school board to legal problems. Coleman issued a leaflet to the rank and file saying: 'in other words, we

workers should pay with our jobs in order to shield management from lawsuits that angry parents might file over unsafe conditions the school board created.'

The union only relented after it was clear that Hollifield's false statements had opened the school board to possible legal action, and that Mary had widespread support among her coworkers. Angry drivers demanded the union take her case to arbitration at a union meeting last September. They pressed local stewards on the job for answers about her case, and donated hundreds of dollars to support Coleman in a collection at the bus terminals organized by the SEP.

At the June 17 arbitration hearing the school board's attorney reiterated that Coleman was guilty of negligence and had endangered the life of a child. He then argued that the termination was justified because she had been disciplined for the 1995 protest.

Mary Coleman drew up the outlines of her defense case in consultation with the SEP. At the hearing the union attorney exposed the school board's false and inaccurate statements, including Hollifield's testimony, explained the circumstances behind the child being left unattended, and concluded that Coleman had not been fired for being an unsafe driver but in retaliation for her outspoken political opposition to management.

In his July 6 ruling, Arbitrator Thomas Gravelle rejected the school board's contention that leaving a child unattended was a 'similar act of misconduct' as participating in the January 1995 protest. He acknowledged the extenuating circumstances that had 'distracted Coleman' on May 1, 1997, saying she was 'confronted twice by an angry mother who was very upset and hostile.' In a footnote, Gravelle cited as 'incorrect' Hollifield's testimony that there had been a previous incident for which the board had been sued.

Having thoroughly undermined the basis for firing Coleman, the arbitrator allowed management to save face by ruling that Coleman was 'negligent' for leaving the child unattended and should, therefore, be suspended for 30 days. Gravelle concluded: 'The discharge of Mary Coleman is reduced to an unpaid 30 work-day suspension. She shall be reinstated and made whole for the period subsequent to the suspension.'

The defeat of this victimization takes place as school bus drivers have increasingly come into struggle, and it has become clear why both the school board and the union wanted to get rid of Coleman. Two weeks ago

drivers overwhelmingly rejected a concessions contract brought back by the union, which called for the elimination of bonuses, coffee break money, seniority rights and job classifications.

The reinstatement of Mary Coleman is an important victory for the working class. It demonstrates the strength of a resolute and politically prepared leadership to oppose the attacks of management, its political representatives and the labor bureaucracy.

After receiving the arbitrator's decision Thursday, Mary Coleman spoke with the World Socialist Web Site. She said, 'Management had singled me out because I am their political opponent and fight for the interests of the working class. They lied and did everything to break me. But we had truth on our side and workers responded by writing letters, and speaking up and believing in me.

'I want to thank the Socialist Equality Party for hanging in there with me and never giving up. Workers from throughout the world knew about this case and this is something the school board couldn't ignore. We fought and we pushed the union, which was not even going to take my case to arbitration. If the working class believes they don't have an alternative, they do.

'The outcome of this struggle was never guaranteed, but we fought. The school board and the union were banking on us folding up and going home, but we didn't. It wasn't easy, in fact, it was the hardest thing I've ever done. But we won't give up the fight, in fact we are just beginning.

'As long as we live under this system, we the workers will have to fight. We can't believe that we'll get justice in the courts. The justice system only represents those in power, not working people. All we have is solidarity. I didn't win this today, we as workers did. The SEP has made me conscious of that. Now all the workers around the world need to know it.'

See Also:

The unions: What Mary Coleman's case reveals
[21 October 1996]



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