

Los Angeles school bus drivers strike

Kim Saito
5 April 2002

About 800 school bus drivers in Los Angeles began a strike April 2 against Laidlaw Educational Services, the main bus contractor for the nation's second largest school district. The strike by Teamsters Local 572 members is the first in 30 years for the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Laidlaw Transit Inc., the largest of five transportation companies in the district, and the union had been negotiating salaries and benefits for seven months. Since the workers rejected management's final offer in March the two sides have been at an impasse. A federal mediator from the National Labor Relations Board has called a meeting between the two parties for April 4.

Unlike district-employed drivers represented by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) who make from \$15 to \$22 an hour, Laidlaw drivers begin at \$8.25 an hour, with the highest seniority drivers earning \$12.90. Their benefits and retirement packages are also inferior even though they are required to pass the same background checks with the FBI and Department of Transportation and have the same qualifications. This vast disparity between the two sections of drivers is the responsibility of the Teamsters and SEIU bureaucracies.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with several pickets at the Laidlaw yard in Gardena. Many described impossible working conditions—low wages, split shifts, tiered wage levels, greater financial burdens on the workers for their own medical insurance, shortened sick leaves and no vacation pay—which have now become commonplace in many industries, especially in transportation and service industries. In the 1970s, '80s and '90s, the AFL-CIO bureaucracy betrayed countless militant strikes across the country against these very conditions.

In a related event, on March 7 workers at Los Angeles International Airport demonstrated against substandard wages and poor benefit plans. According to

union organizers, 3,000 of the 40,000 employees at the airport are not paid the city's supposedly mandated "living wage" and receive no benefits.

Craig, a school transportation worker with 13 years seniority, said, "I've been on this job for 13 years. I make \$12.90 an hour. For the type of responsibility put upon me, it's unfair to treat me with disrespect. My attendance rate is 96 percent. We are transporting children. All we're asking for is a little respectability and appreciation. If I can get \$14 an hour, I'd be okay with that.

"The public needs to understand that we care about the students. Most of us here are senior veteran drivers. The average Laidlaw worker is living from paycheck to paycheck. How can we live on what we make? We've got kids too. Many are single women raising families."

Tracey and Chanita spoke about the split shift. Tracey, with eight years seniority, said, "We're standing up for our rights. Five percent is not asking for a lot. We spend 12-13 hours a day of our time for this job. It's a split shift. Everybody is on split shift. That's 2.5 hours in the morning and 2.5 hours in the afternoon that we're guaranteed."

Chanita has 14 years' seniority. She said, "In between if something happens and the district calls us, we have to come in and pick up the students. We're on call all during that time in between. Say there's a shooting at a high school, we have to go immediately. We don't have eight-hour drivers.

"And the new drivers, who start at \$8.25 an hour, are given the special education kids. I drive special ed kids too. If you have a kid who has an illness or some kind of disease, the district policy is not to inform the driver under the Privacy Act. At the end of the day, if a child's parent is not at home, you have to stay there on the bus with the child until the parent gets home. This is LA Unified's policy. We're not just dealing with Laidlaw. It's also the district. Those are the things the

district is not going to comment on.”

Another woman driver said, “We used to get a Christmas party and bonus, gift certificates at Thanksgiving and Christmas. We don’t get anything anymore.

“If you transfer from another yard, you lose your seniority. I had to transfer because my mom was ill. I have about five years as a transit driver and four years as a school bus driver. My five years were just thrown out.”

After 12 years on the job, Thomas Freeman is making only \$11.39 an hour. “In 10 years I got a little over one dollar raise. There hasn’t been a cost-of-living raise in the last six years. The parents are supporting us. They’re stopping by, waving and honking their horns. The parents understand it’s not the drivers’ fault.

“We rejected the contract 26 days ago. The company never returned our phone calls to sit down and resolve this. We worked those 26 days in good faith. Another thing, the buses are overcrowded. Some of the 78-passenger buses are carrying more kids.”

Sharon has 16-17 years with Laidlaw. She said, “I’m really making nothing. The majority of my students are in wheel chairs. They require extra special care. You need to stop, pull over, take another 5-10 minutes to help them. We have eight wheel chair kids.

“After 16-17 years with this company, I feel I deserve a raise. We get no vacation pay and only five sick days a year.”

Craig added, “It’s called slavery—modern-day slavery.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact