

Mt. Clemens, Michigan school bus drivers strike

A WSWS reporting team
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School bus drivers in Mt. Clemens, Michigan, 25 miles northeast of Detroit, carried out a one-and-a-half day strike Monday and Tuesday to secure promised wage increases from the private transportation company which services the district. The walkout ended Tuesday evening with the Teamsters announcing an undisclosed settlement amid company threats to bring in out-of-state replacements to break the strike.

Thirty-one bus drivers provide transportation for 1,000 students, or half the enrollment in the Mt. Clemens Community School District. They are employed by First Student, the largest private bus operator in the country, and are paid significantly less than other school bus drivers in the area. The strikers were demanding a \$1 an hour wage increase.

The strike shut down transportation Monday afternoon and all day Tuesday. The workers made arrangements to provide transportation for all special needs children, according to bus drivers who picketed throughout the day in front of the company bus depot.

First Student threatened to bring in strikebreakers from Illinois, Ohio and Indiana to resume normal transportation schedules on Wednesday. Teamsters Local 614, the bargaining agent for the drivers, declined to comment on the settlement to end the strike.

First Student runs 60,000 buses and employs 68,000 people in the United States. The company is a subsidiary of the British Transportation conglomerate FirstGroup, and is the largest private operator of school buses in the US. The company bought up Laidlaw, a school bus transportation contractor, in 2007, acquiring the workforce in Mt. Clemens as part of the deal.

FirstGroup is a multinational corporation worth some £1.87 billion, (\$3.1 billion) and employs over 100,000 people. The company is Britain's largest bus operator, and runs more than 20 percent of all bus service in the

country.

Contractors like First Student pay lower wages than those paid directly by school boards. As education budgets have tightened, schools have increasingly sought to privatize transportation and use contractors to drive down costs and lower the living conditions of their employees. First Student's web site boasts that "outsourcing your student school bus transportation services can save you ten percent or more."

Local 614 President David Bluhm told the *World Socialist Web Site* that privatization and labor contracting has become ever more prevalent as school budgets are being slashed. "As conditions get worse, districts more and more move toward privatization."

Tracy, a bus driver with over ten years' experience, said that First Student gave the workers no choice. "We've been asking for months to get even a modest pay increase, but the company wouldn't have it. We just decided to walk out. After First Student took over Laidlaw, things have only gotten worse. We constantly have to do more for the same pay."

"We had some upset parents," she said, "but a lot of people agree that there needs to be a fight."

Ellen, another bus driver, said, "the company keeps talking about safety, but they give us old, raggedy buses that always break down, and put all the responsibility on us if something goes wrong. We love these kids, but we work under conditions that aren't conducive to their safety. We're the lowest-paid bus drivers in the district. Other bus drivers start out at \$15 per hour, but we have people who have been working here for ten or fifteen years who don't even make that much."

Workers at First Student make \$4-5 per hour less than most school bus drivers, according to Bluhm. The entry level at First Student is \$10.90, with the highest wage,

based on seniority, reaching \$14.35.

Dianne, another worker, said, “It’s like the little people don’t count any more. The company gets more money, but we’re told to do more for less.”

Bus service in Mt. Clemens has been privatized for over ten years, according to Bluhm. Shortly after First Student took over Laidlaw, the school board closed a contract offering the company 15 percent more per hour.

The bus drivers, who were previously not unionized, joined the Teamsters in October of last year. They signed a contract in April, which vaguely promised that some of the added revenues would be reflected in wage increases.

The local Teamsters president said wages were the primary reason for the strike. “When we decided the contract, there were no wage provisions,” Bluhm said. “First Student got a 15 percent increase in the rate that it charged the school. But we haven’t seen any of that.”

When the contract went into force, he said the union was told there would be meetings to discuss salary increases for the bus drivers. “But First Student hasn’t taken a single step in our direction. They were supposed to pass on part of the fee increase,” the union official said.

Miguel, a student at Mt. Clemens Community High School, said, “The bus drivers should have got a raise. And since they didn’t, it’s right for them to go on strike.”

Another worker told the WSWS, “We carry precious cargo; we’re responsible for the safety of the children from the moment they leave their parents until they get to the schools. It’s not easy, and it takes a whole lot of skill to drive a bus and manage a bunch of kids at the same time. And they want us to do all this for \$10 per hour.”

The bus drivers in Mt. Clemens are by no means alone in their opposition to low wages and privatization. In Dearborn, public school employees and supporters held a protest outside city hall Tuesday against the district’s plan to slash \$18.6 million from the budget, which will result in the layoff of 287 school employees including teachers, custodians and school bus drivers. In Lansing, the Michigan state capital, an estimated 800 people rallied in opposition to the school cuts announced last week by Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm.

The American Association of School Administrators reports that 23 percent of school districts throughout the country are reducing or eliminating school transportation for the present school year due to lower revenues from state governments. Major cuts are taking place in states as wide ranging as Texas, Massachusetts, Ohio, Indiana, Georgia and California. Most states only finance a portion of transportation needs, saddling districts with expenses they cannot meet.

The strike and protests are indications of a growing opposition among workers, students, and parents alike to the attack on school employees and the right to public education.



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