

Retired driver blames budget cuts for fatal accident on Detroit school bus

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The following letter was submitted to the World Socialist Web Site by Mary Coleman, a retired Detroit Public School bus driver. The letter pertains to the May 20 death of an 11-year-old student in Detroit who was struck by a tree branch and fatally injured as she leaned out of the school bus window to say goodbye to her friends.

The school bus accident on Thursday, May 20, which killed 11-year-old Tiffany Lynn Ross-DiCicco, was a terrible tragedy. I am very sorry for the family for the loss of their child.

I also feel great sorrow for the bus driver who drove that route each day. I hope the school authorities and the media do not use this tragedy to victimize the driver as they have done in so many other cases.

As a retired driver with 25 years on the job I know driving a school bus can be very rewarding and at the same time very stressful. Drivers are constantly under the gun to transport children as quickly as possible and to get to a second or third school. At the same time they are transporting anywhere from 25 to 40 students without any type of assistance.

Due to the continuous downsizing and budget cuts, in the early 1980s the school board eliminated transportation aides who were there to monitor and protect the children on buses. If an aide had been on the bus last week this tragedy would never have happened. Because of the law there are still aides on buses transporting special education students—at least for now—but not on regular routes.

In addition, the school authorities have been outsourcing transportation services to private companies for years in order to cut costs. These for-profit bus companies pay lower wages and are under

pressure to cut corners on safety and training. The bus Tiffany was on was not a Detroit Public School bus but belonged to a subcontractor DHT Transportation. Because their pay is so low many drivers for the subcontractors do several runs in order to earn a 40-hour a week paycheck.

Now the school system's Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb is outsourcing all student transportation, a move that will throw hundreds of experienced, professional drivers out of their jobs. Bobb says this will save \$49 million and improve safety. Tell that to the family of Tiffany Lynn Ross-DiCicco!

Rather than defending the public school bus drivers, Teamsters Local 214 is going along with Bobb's privatization plans behind the backs of rank-and-file workers. There must be something in it for the Teamsters union.

Robert Bobb is slashing tens of millions from the school budget, shutting down another 45 schools on top of the closing of 27 schools last year and laying off at least another 1,500 school employees. The additional closures mean that more than half of the schools open in 2006 will have been closed, while privately run charter schools have been expanded.

The school officials, Mayor Bing and the big businessmen behind them always say the measures they are taking are for the benefit for the children while they line the pockets of the rich with taxpayers' money. At the same time, from Bush's No Child Left Behind to Obama's school "reform," teachers and school employees are being used as scapegoats for low test scores and "failing" schools.

The long-time layoffs and budget cuts have put the lives of all Detroit Public School students and school employees in danger. They are also destroying the basic

human right to public education. This injustice took the life of Tiffany and devastated the young man who drove that route.

Tiffany's school, Phoenix Multi-Cultural Academy, is located on the city's southwest side, an area I used to pick up and drop off students. Many of the families who live there have low incomes because the major employer—General Motors—shut two big plants there in the 1980s. The school is in a high traffic area and the principal has repeatedly called city leaders to complain about it. However, nothing was done.

Tragedies like this will happen again due to outsourcing for cheaper wages and other cutbacks. This can only be stopped if bus drivers and all working class people begin to organize themselves independently of the Democratic Party and the trade unions and fight for the resources needed to provide all children a high-quality and safe public education.



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