

Ypsilanti, Michigan school board approves 17 percent pay cut for bus workers

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The Ypsilanti Public Schools board approved a plan June 7 to consolidate transportation services at the county level, cutting 10 percent of the district's bus crew and slashing pay by 17 percent. The vote was taken before a crowd of at least 150 workers, parents, students and other residents who overwhelmingly opposed the measure.

During a seven-hour-long meeting June 9, the Ann Arbor school board voted unanimously to adopt a resolution expressing interest in consolidating, pending a formal contract from the Washtenaw Intermediate School District (WISD), the coordinating agency over all school districts in the county.

The Ann Arbor board is also awaiting a counter-bid of drastic concessions from Teamsters union Local 214, volunteered over the heads of its rank-and-file. Bus workers in Ann Arbor were targeted for privatization earlier this year. Whatever the board adopts, bus workers face substantial losses.

Of the 10 districts in Washtenaw County, three have adopted the WISD proposal—Ypsilanti, Lincoln and Ypsilanti's poor eastside district, Willow Run. Chelsea, Dexter, Manchester, Milan, Saline and Whitmore Lake public schools are required to vote on the measure before the end of June. The Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor votes were seen as pivotal to the plan, with smaller districts more likely to participate. Bus workers from all over the county attended the meeting Monday night in Ypsilanti to express their opposition.

If other districts sign on, the Ypsilanti school district stands to cut costs by \$1.3 million per year, virtually entirely through layoffs and the wage and benefit cuts. All transportation workers are to be laid off "with the option of reapplying" for fewer positions, at lower pay, with no recognition of seniority.

Bus drivers, mechanics and aides will bear health

insurance deductibles of \$4,000 per year for families at the same time they are subjected to monthly premium increases of up to 30 percent, as high as \$830 per month for families.

Bus drivers earning an average of \$18 per hour will have their pay cut down to \$13 to \$14; mechanics earning \$23 will be cut to \$21 or less; bus aides who presently make only \$13 an hour will see their pay cut to \$11 an hour.

Many bus workers are currently guaranteed a minimum of four hours per day of work, meaning that many days even the highest-paid bus drivers are barely scraping out \$70 a day before taxes, or about \$360 a week. Under the plan, the guaranteed minimum is to be eliminated.

Taken together, the compensation cuts spell the pauperization of bus workers, who are already among the lowest paid of school staff. Washtenaw County has one of the highest costs of living in the Midwest, and many transportation employees are currently forced to work multiple jobs just to meet mortgage or rent payments.

The WISD plan scraps pensions of those not rehired. This provision is aimed at forcing older, better-compensated workers with more health care needs into early retirement. Many bus workers with decades' worth of experience have stated they will not reapply. The result will be that transportation crews will be staffed with fewer, less-experienced workers, with no job security, who would receive expedited training before the start of the new school year.

The plan bears clear implications for safety and service levels. With fewer drivers, more children will be riding longer routes, with fewer aides on hand to monitor them. A handful of mechanics will be responsible for servicing the aged fleets throughout the

county, resulting in more breakdowns and delays.

Aside from the attacks on the bus workers, the consolidation plan also calls for a scaling back of door-to-door pick-ups and drop-offs. Children will instead be required to walk long distances to bus stops—regardless of dangerous roads, weather, or neighborhoods. A document circulated by the Ypsilanti school board recommended a maximum walking distance of 1.5 miles—three times the half-mile limit that aroused parental concern over the WISD plan.

At the Ypsilanti meeting, numerous bus workers and parents expressed distress over having children walking such long distances, especially in sub-zero temperatures. “It is a very regular occurrence that you will see kids with no socks, no hat, no gloves, no coat,” a teacher said. “I give away clothes to these kids—some are homeless, and many have cousins and siblings that also need clothing.”

A bus driver told the meeting, “Many parents do not have transportation. It’s not a job we do for the money. If you spread it out through the year, we only make \$10 an hour. What we make compared to what the administrators make is nothing. Why are you taking from the bottom? Why are you taking everything away from us? Think about the kids, not the bottom line.”

“Public schools are for the kids, and for everyone,” a special needs bus driver told the school board. “Some of my kids can’t speak to you, can’t see you. If you change things around, they get scared, they freak out. They need regularity. They depend on us. You don’t care what we have to deal with.” She was interrupted by the school board president, who said the drivers were not “adopting a respectful tone.” Amid a loud outcry, the driver responded, “This is how we feel, and you don’t care! You sit there and do what? Push papers? You take our jobs, and what’s going to happen to the children?”

A bus mechanic told this reporter he feared for the future of public services and the conditions of the workers. “I don’t care what anybody says,” he said, “the cost of living is way up. This is 2010, not 1975. I don’t know where I’m going to end up in this mess. The district is not prepared to implement a consolidation of any reasonable kind. On what they want to pay drivers, who’s going to take a job like that?”

Another mechanic remarked on the fact that drivers

work extraordinarily long hours that are not counted on the clock because they are “dead-head time,” with no students on the buses. “I see drivers pulling 14-hour shifts every day just to get 6 hours’ pay. It’s enslavement.”

Transportation is on the chopping block only two months after a series of devastating school closures, program cuts and teacher layoffs were approved throughout the county. In Ypsilanti, the school board enacted a plan to eliminate up to one third of the district’s teachers and forced the shuttering of two schools.

Districts across the state and around the country are undertaking similarly drastic cuts in a bid to compete for paltry government funding. State education funds have collapsed along with the housing market and, especially in Michigan, the auto industry, leaving schools and other basic social infrastructure without tax revenue.

Taking advantage of the desperate position of public education, the Obama administration’s Race to the Top program compels funding-starved school districts to slash and burn their own infrastructure, privatize, sell off property, and attack worker compensation.

Struggling districts like Ypsilanti, where manufacturing jobs have declined by 20 percent since 2008, are easy targets for the Obama administration’s attacks. More prospective cuts are already imminent.

After being identified in the bottom 5 percent of schools statewide for test scores and dropout rates, Ypsilanti’s only public high school has been singled out for closure, “turnaround,” or “transformation.” These options threaten the mass firing of teachers and the likely takeover of the school by private charter interests.

The school board announced at its June 7 meeting that it had to “sign off” on one option by June 14 to get the government incentives. Over booing, Superintendent Dedrick Martin told those in attendance, “It’s not an ideal situation, but the \$2 million available to us is unprecedented.”



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