

Washtenaw County, Michigan school bus drivers face deep wage cuts

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Bus drivers, mechanics, and aides for ten public school districts in Washtenaw County, Michigan are targeted for layoffs, double-digit wage cuts, and other attacks under a countywide consolidation plan. The proposal will affect hundreds of bus workers and tens of thousands of students across Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, and surrounding towns.

The Ypsilanti Public Schools board is voting on the measure at a special meeting June 7, and the Ann Arbor Public Schools board will take a vote June 9. Ypsilanti's distressed eastside Willow Run district has already approved the plan. The proposal is under consideration by the Chelsea, Dexter, Lincoln, Manchester, Milan, Saline, and Whitmore Lake public schools, which are required to vote on the measure before the end of June.

Crafted by the Washtenaw Intermediate School District (WISD), the coordinating agency for Washtenaw County schools, the plan would cut transportation costs by as much as 25 percent, virtually entirely through cuts to staff levels, wages, and compensation.

Transportation employees will be laid off and made to re-apply for fewer positions at far lower pay under the plan, with no recognition of seniority. Ten percent of the workforce is to be laid off.

WISD officials have said that those not hired back will lose their pensions. This component of the proposal is aimed at forcing older, better-compensated workers to retire rather than re-apply. Many older bus workers have signaled that they will take early retirement if the plan is enacted.

The proposal calls for a 17 percent pay cut for workers who are already among the lowest paid of all

public school employees.

In Ann Arbor, bus drivers currently make an average of \$17 per hour, and are guaranteed a minimum daily work day of only four hours. The plan would cut the hourly rate to \$13 per hour, and would do away with guaranteed minimum hours.

Ypsilanti drivers earning an average of \$18 per hour will see their wages cut to a similar level. Bus drivers in the Ypsilanti school district have not seen a pay raise in five years. Mechanics currently earning \$23 an hour on average would make \$21. Bus aides earning \$12.92 would be cut to \$11.46 an hour.

Workers will be forced to pay annual health insurance deductibles of \$2,000 for an individual and \$4,000 for families. The plan would impose monthly health insurance premiums of up to 30 percent—translating into \$290 a month for a single employee and \$830 per month for a family.

Washtenaw County is one of the most expensive regions of the Midwest in terms of housing costs, and transportation workers are already struggling on their current wages. The pay cuts now on the table spell the ruination of families, who will not be able to afford their mortgages and other basic necessities.

The consolidation plan comes little more than two months after a series of deep cuts to basic programs and schools throughout the county. In the face of widespread public opposition, school boards imposed school closings, teacher layoffs, and other cuts earlier in the spring, citing the economic crisis and severe shortfall in state and national education funding. (See “Ypsilanti, Michigan, board votes to close schools, impose layoffs”)

Throughout the state and across the country, public school budgets have been subjected to an unprecedented gutting, with hardly a district untouched.

After spending trillions to bail out the banks, the Obama administration and its counterparts at the state level have utilized the economic crisis as an occasion to make school districts compete for meager funds and engage in competitive cost-cutting.

Schools in Michigan, particularly starved of tax funds because of the collapse of the auto industry and the housing market, have been compelled to slash millions of dollars from their already insufficient budgets.

If consolidation is approved by the school districts over the next few weeks, the WISD would take over busing throughout the county, managing fuel budgeting and route planning. In addition to the deep cuts to worker compensation, the WISD has made clear it intends to cut door-to-door service and stops wherever possible.

The result will be that fewer drivers will be transporting more children, with fewer bus aides to assist them. Fewer mechanics will be able to service an already distressed bus fleet, leading to more frequent bus breakdowns and delays.

With fewer designated stops, children will be made to walk up to half a mile to wait for the buses, exposing them to harm from both traffic and harsh winter weather conditions.

In none of the proposed cost-saving measures is the safety of children a consideration. Presently, small children in kindergarten and preschool programs are picked up and dropped off following a “hand-to-hand” rule, with a guardian required to meet the bus at the stop. The plan would apparently scrap the safeguard. An April 22 press release from the WISD first poses the question, “Will certain students be transported door-to-door?” then explains, “Under this design, only those students in special education whose Individualized Education Plan specifies such transportation will receive services.”

Transportation staff have long had to work in threadbare conditions. In Ypsilanti, buses are purchased used; many are now 13 years old and break down continually. The bus garage is in such poor shape that drivers said it has been condemned by the city. In the workers’ “lounge” where bus workers take their breaks, the floor is collapsing. At one point, the corner of the building began crumbling, making the bathroom inaccessible.

The bus workers’ unions play a critical role in

enabling the attacks on workers they supposedly represent. During earlier budget talks, Ypsilanti Support Staff Association president Kevin Fortune repeatedly expressed to administration officials that the union was “on board” with the cuts and that he “wished I could do more.” Bus workers have said they have been told nothing about negotiations between the union and the WISD.

In Ann Arbor, drivers have worked for two years under conditions of wage and hiring freezes without a contract, with a curtailed overtime allotment. The transportation and staff workers were threatened with privatization plans in earlier budget proposals. An Ann Arbor bus driver told this correspondent that last week Teamsters Local 214 head Joseph Valenti volunteered to the WISD a “counter-bid” of major concessions.

The unions—like the school boards, the Obama administration and the Democratic and Republican Parties—accept as a fact the claim that there is “no money” for public education, and that the working class must pay for the bankruptcy of the school districts.

In reality, there is ample money for education, but it is a question of what class controls it. The funding crisis in public education is but one reflection of the gross inequality of a society managed entirely in the interests of the wealthy, who have trillions at their disposal for bank bailouts and criminal wars.



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