

New York City school bus drivers may strike over job security

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8 January 2013

New York City's school bus drivers, who transport over 150,000 students, including preschoolers and those with special education needs, may soon strike in response to provocations by the city's Department of Education.

Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1181, whose members include over 9,000 yellow bus drivers, matrons and mechanics, has said that it will call a strike this week if job security provisions are not respected by the city in its bids for services. School buses are leased by the city from private companies.

On December 21, the city's billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, announced that when current contracts with private bus companies expire in July 2013 the city will accept competitive bids for 1,100 of its routes, about one sixth of the total.

The new bids do not require companies picked to observe seniority provisions or pay rates that workers now receive. These rights, won by workers after a 16-week strike in 1979, are known as the Employee Protection Provision (EPP).

Bus companies that pay far lower wages to their drivers will be able to outbid the companies now holding the contracts. Senior drivers will either lose their jobs or be forced to accept drastically lower wages.

The DOE has announced plans to distribute free Metro Cards (for use on city buses and subways) to parents and to reimburse parents who drive their children to school. This plan does not even begin to address the basic needs of thousands of parents who are unable to accompany their children on public transportation, often in chaotic and crowded rush-hour conditions, or who do not own cars.

The plan exhibits the same disregard for parents and for the students themselves that is reflected in the city's

proposal of what amounts to a program of putting poorly trained and inexperienced drivers behind the wheels of school buses.

The latest attack against the school bus drivers has been developing for over a year. The New York State Court of Appeals in 2011 barred the city from including the EPP in contracts with bus companies as a result of the state's competitive bidding laws, after a suit by 23 nonunion bus companies,

In July 2011 Bloomberg asked New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo to veto a bill that would have extended the protections in bus contracts. The Democratic governor did so in September, citing the decision by the Court of Appeals. The line of the Bloomberg administration has been that its hands are tied by the courts.

In 2011, according to the *New York Times*, lawyers for the city told the Court of Appeals that the local's president, Michael Cordiello, "repeatedly warned the city that his union 'could not control a systemwide wildcat strike by its members.'" This indicates a real fear by the ATU bureaucracy that any action by bus drivers could quickly spread out of its control. The union is nervous about the decision to eliminate the EPP from bids because it fears the loss of dues income.

Given the history of city, state and court efforts to destroy the living standards and job security of the school bus drivers, Bloomberg's attempt last week to invoke last fall's hurricane in order to denounce the drivers was especially brazen. "In a year when our students have already missed a week or more of school because of Hurricane Sandy, striking against our school children, we think, would be totally irresponsible," the mayor complained. "Going through with a strike now would be unfair to our kids and absolutely unacceptable."

On Friday, the city issued another set of bids that will not be bound by the EEP. The city has not negotiated with the union since December 21.

Drivers and their supporters rallied on Friday at City Hall to protest Bloomberg's efforts to eliminate seniority rights and wage standards. The bus drivers have significant support from parents whose children ride on the buses. One poster on a parents' Facebook group noted, after it was announced that Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott would hold a news conference, "Wow, someone is really trying hard to convince parents that DOE is the good guy in this scenario. But the only way to convince us would be to announce that the EPP is back in the bids."

WSWS reporters spoke to some school bus drivers, members of Local 1181, on Monday as they waited for children leaving a Manhattan elementary public school.

Kenny, a driver for 10 years, said, "Job security is the biggest issue. It is a big deal. I could definitely lose my job. Even guys with 25 years are very nervous about this. The city wants to contract out to the lowest bidder. If a company loses a contract, then all those jobs will be lost. If we have to strike, then we have to do so."

"The union has been negotiating since October. So far I have seen nothing positive in these negotiations. Their ultimate goal is to create jobs at lower wages. This is happening all over."

John Barone, a driver for 18 years, said, "The contract for drivers working for companies that transport special education ended at the beginning of the school year, but the union has been trying to negotiate. Others still have their contract. Most public school bus drivers are in Local 1181, just not those driving pre-kindergarten, and some private schools like Jewish religious schools that get school bus service."

"They don't want to guarantee job security. What company wants to guarantee jobs? But why would you take a job if you know it will be over when the contract is up, after a couple of years? How will you get responsible, family people that can be trusted? Who would drive a bus for \$10 an hour? I really believe that is what they want."

Manuel Ruiz, with 12 years' experience driving school buses, told the WSWS, "I have only special education students as passengers. I have training to deal with special education students. They want us to start at the bottom. They want to cut our salaries in half. I

make \$27,000 to \$28,000 but they want to make it \$14,000. We suffer in the economy, too. Who is saving money if they do this? Who is mugging us? How will we live?"



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