

New York school drivers: “All they want is to push us backwards”

A WSWS reporting team
16 January 2013

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke on Tuesday with New York school bus drivers on the eve of a strike called to defend their jobs. Drivers expressed both their determination to defend their jobs against the attack by the administration of the city’s billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, and their concern for the safety and well-being of the students they drive to and from school every day.

Jean Franck, a driver with 15 years, explained, “All they want is to push us backward. I know a worker here who is getting food stamps. How are we going to survive? They want to put us back to like the way it was. We will be going back to slavery times.”

Irwin Brenen has driven yellow buses for nine years. “What they are telling us,” he said, “is these guys with seniority should start at the bottom again. We lose all our seniority, all our benefits, and start over again at minimum wage. With the new contracts the companies cannot afford to pay us what we are getting now, which after nine years is \$29 an hour. If this goes through, we would be losing \$21 an hour. This is what the company has told us. The only way they could hire us back would be at minimum wages. When have you ever heard that you have to have your wages taken away just to keep your job? We are not asking for any more wages, we want to keep what we have.”

He continued, “My company is for the most part carrying special education students. They have wheelchairs, cerebral palsy, Downs syndrome. We have to be extra vigilant with them. There are seizures on the bus. We get medical codes to know what to do with a child. We are a two-man team with the matron. The matrons are union and so are the mechanics. They will come out with us.”

Another driver, Hantz, read a text from a parent: “I want you and the matrons to know I understand you need to go on strike. You deserve to be taken care of properly.”

Jesse Matias, a veteran driver of 35 years, told the WSWS, “They have been hiring replacements. The police are here saying we will destroy the buses. That is not true. We are only here to protect our positions as professional bus drivers. Our principal objective is to protect the EPP [Employee Protection Provision]. The mayor says it is illegal, but it is not. It has been in place for 47 years. Even though it was in place since 1965, it took a 13-week strike to make sure it stayed in place.”

Jesse took part in the previous strike in 1979. “I’ll put it simply as this: we were the poor class in ‘79, now we are even poorer with expenses and everything going up. Striking is the only resort that we have, even though the union is trying to negotiate. But Bloomberg is saying he’s going to save the city money by taking away from these professional drivers and escorts.” He added, “We think the transit workers and teachers should join us on the picket line. They are coming after them next.”

Another experienced driver, Rudy Herbert, described working conditions: “We don’t have any protection on the job. We must wake up at 3 a.m. every morning to be here at 4:30. We are dedicated professional drivers who take our driving responsibility very seriously. We have no protection. If anything happens, it’s our fault. They don’t pay us overtime. They harass us if we do overtime and we try to get them to pay for it. They won’t pay for an EZ-pass to go over the Triborough bridge, so we have to take a long way around it, and still they won’t pay us overtime.

“They say they want to save money, but it destroys people’s lives. I have a mortgage to pay. I could lose this. People are afraid because you could lose everything. They tell us we are numbers. If we are not numbers, we need to stand up and show our colors now.”

Wirman Lopez told the WSWS, “We are all fighting for our right to jobs. We are parents. We care for the safety of the kids. I have been working as a driver for 17 years. We

take courses on how to handle the kids. There are 15,000 drivers. They will be bringing new, inexperienced drivers who don't know what they are doing.”

Roseanne Fenezia added, “We have 19A certified instructor licenses. Where is the chancellor getting these people? I want to see, are they certified? The company asked us today if we are with them or 1181, would we work tomorrow if there is a strike or go out with the others. Don't ask me what they would pay. The owner was doing a lot under the table. She was under house arrest.”

Bus operator Ellis Campo gave his take on the situation. “I carry 26 little kids, from 5 years to 11. Right now that includes six kindergarten kids. There is no helper on the bus. You have to watch these kids and you have to watch the road. People cut you off. There aren't places open to park the bus to let kids off. I work 11 hours a day. There is only overtime after 10 hours. After this school I have to pick up children at another school.”

He continued, “Bloomberg doesn't really care. We are not asking for a raise. We just want our job security that we had since the Mollen agreement in 1979. Now he wants to change that. We usually wait for what the city transit union gets and normally ask for below that amount, but transit did not get anything yet since last year. Now they are attacking the teachers, too. We know times are tough, but we have to deal with how to live.”

“The economy collapsed and these people are still getting millions of dollars in bonuses, getting richer,” Ellis explained. “This school bus company, Atlantic Express, may go under because a few days after the flood [from Hurricane Sandy] they said it didn't have insurance. AIG, these are the same insurance people that Obama helped. They got millions, they got bonuses.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact