

New York school bus drivers walk picket lines for second day

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New York City school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics walked the picket lines for a second day in their strike against the city's plan to attack the wages and benefits of these workers who are employed by private companies that contract with the city. The administration of New York's Mayor Michael Bloomberg is determined to break a decades-long agreement, known as the Employee Protection Plan (EPP), which maintains the wages, benefits, and seniority of nearly 8,800 workers regardless of which private company they work for. The EPP emerged out of a bitter 13-week strike by these workers in 1979.

The effectiveness of the strike increased on its second day, with only 2,320 of 7,700 routes in operation, down from 3,000 on Wednesday. No negotiations are taking place, and it is clear that the city is willing to inflict an unlimited amount of pain on city schoolchildren and their parents in order to achieve its goals, which include setting a precedent for further attacks on city transit workers, teachers and every section of the municipal workforce. Bloomberg arrogantly announced that the strike would not last past June, which of course is the end of the school year.

New contracts for school bus routes are being put out for competitive bid for the coming school year. Without the EPP the private companies will seek to under-bid each other by getting rid of workers with seniority and slashing the wages and benefits of others to minimum levels. The bus drivers and matrons currently make an average of \$35,000 a year, a modest income in one of the most expensive cities in the world. If Bloomberg is successful, those workers who retained their jobs could see their pay reduced to as little as \$10 per hour with loss of benefits, making it impossible for them to support their families.

In New York City, a majority of the 1.1 million

students walk or take public transportation to school. However, 152,000, including more than 50,000 with mental or physical disabilities, use buses provided by the city. The drivers and matrons on these routes are charged with safely delivering the children to and from school through crowded city streets, and have the added responsibility of caring for their special needs during the trip. The mayor's plan would not only decimate the living standards of these skilled and experienced workers, it would also place the care of these children in the hands of the lowest bidders who would staff the busses with low-paid and inexperienced personnel.

The multibillionaire Bloomberg has brazenly accused the bus drivers of holding the city hostage, attempting to turn the parents against the strikers. In the face of the obvious difficulty of portraying these workers as lazy or overpaid, the administration and the big business media have now begun to depict the attack on the workers as necessary to eliminate "waste".

A front-page article in the *New York Times* took this tack, suggesting that half-empty school buses indicate featherbedding. The article was forced to acknowledge, well beyond its headline and first few paragraphs, that the city's practice of contracting out the bus routes to private companies has been riddled with corruption and mismanagement. In addition, the Bloomberg administration's own program of "school choice," along with its public school closures and consolidations, has required that many students travel much farther than previously.

The union representing the school bus drivers, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181, has done nothing to win or mobilize support for these workers. Like the rest of the so-called "labor movement," it is motivated above all by the defense of its own perks and privileges. Local 1181 President Michael Cordiello

pleaded with Bloomberg, announcing on Thursday that the strike could be ended quickly if the mayor took a hand.

A team of World Socialist Web Site reporters went to the Boro Transit bus garage in the East New York section to speak to bus drivers and their co-workers about the strike.

A group of about 150 drivers and matrons/bus attendants had assembled in the dark and cold at 6:00 AM to form a picket line to protest Mayor Bloomberg's attack on their rights. In this working-class part of Brooklyn, through which many other workers make an early morning commute, drivers and truckers repeatedly honked their horns in support of the strikers and waved to them. Cheers went up from the pickets. After they had assembled, workers marched around the block, chanting, "Bloomberg must go!" and "Save EPP!"

Bus drivers spoke of the outrage they felt about the threat to eliminate the EPP. One driver who transports special education students told us: "As a bus operator I have the privilege for the last 25 years of being the recipient of the Mollen Agreement [another name for the EPP]. I went from two other companies to this company and I was able to keep my pay scale and my pension. There was no break in service. I have the ability to pass on what I received to others. We all need to work and stay employed. Just as I received the benefit from 1979, I want to pass it on to someone else.

"If this thing goes through, we could be on the unemployment line, and lose everything that's associated with it. We could lose our pensions. We could lose our healthcare."

We asked the driver about the political issues raised by the strike and he said, "I believe this is a political struggle. From a little research on my own, I believe that there are people in positions of power that want to make this country a dictatorship. They want to get rid of the working class. The same things that happened in Germany in the 1930s could happen here. They had the brown shirts and we have Blackwater. The government puts the focus on terrorism instead of the problems at home. Obama has his own agenda.

"It's a matter of awareness. The government wants to keep the people ignorant. As someone said, 'The only necessary thing for evil to win is for good people to do nothing.'"

Another driver, Emily, said, "I've been working on the buses since 2000. The kids I drive have hearing problems. I love these kids. I have to communicate with them and I don't know sign language, although I want to get trained. Sometimes I need to touch them to get their attention. There is a lot of care that goes into my job.

"Now we are going to lose a lot of our benefits if this goes through. Bloomberg is a billionaire and we are poor people who work day to day to support our families. We need these jobs and benefits. We need pensions and medical."



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