

Threat of federal intervention to break New York City school bus drivers strike

Rosa Shahnazarian and Jerry White
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Private school bus companies, with behind-the-scenes support from New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, are appealing to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to order an end to the six-day strike by nearly 9,000 school bus drivers, bus attendants known as matrons, and mechanics.

A hearing of the federal labor board is scheduled for Tuesday morning to take testimony from private bus executives who charge that the strike is illegal. A consortium of 20 bus companies—which are being fined for not provided contracted services—say they are caught in the middle of a dispute between the city and the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181. The NLRB could act as early as Tuesday afternoon to break the strike.

Mayor Bloomberg is seeking to destroy the job security and living standards of the yellow bus workers, who transport over 100,000 public and 50,000 parochial school children each day. Many are special education students with physical and developmental handicaps.

The workers voted to strike after Bloomberg put up bids for two new bus contracts that do not include the Employee Protection Provision (EPP). The provision—won by bus drivers after a 13-week strike in 1979—guarantees current wages, seniority rights and pensions for workers who transfer to another bus company.

Bloomberg—whose personal fortune is estimated to be \$25 billion—has insisted the city can no longer afford the provisions. He has also claimed that the EPP is a violation of under competitive bidding laws upheld by state courts. Without the EPP in place, the private bus companies would be free to replace current workers with untrained, underpaid and inexperienced drivers.

The effort to destroy the EPP is part of an ongoing onslaught by Mayor Bloomberg and the city's financial elite to dismantle public education and expand for-profit

charter schools. It coincides with efforts by the mayor to expand the use of standardized tests to victimize teachers and shut schools and other attacks on public sector workers, including transit workers, clerical employees, fire fighters and sanitation workers.

Since the school bus drivers are employed by private companies, the authorities are unable to use the strikebreaking New York State Taylor Law, which has been employed against public sector workers in the past, to break this strike. The bus companies and the city administration are therefore looking to the NLRB, consisting mostly of appointees of the Obama White House, to intervene against the workers. The political establishment is concerned that the strike—which has already effectively cancelled two-thirds of the 7,700 routes—can become the catalyst for a much broader eruption of social opposition.

If the Obama administration does not move to end the strike it is only because the government is relying on ATU Local 1181, the United Federation of Teachers and the New York City AFL-CIO to isolate and defeat the strike.

The ATU, which has a long record of granting concessions to the city, did everything to prevent a strike. Once it occurred, the only “strategy” the ATU has outlined is a petition campaign appealing to the mayor to be more reasonable. This can only lead to defeat.

A reporting team from the WSWWS visited the picket line Sunday at Reliant Transportation in Greenpoint, Brooklyn and distributed the Socialist Equality Party statement, “Mobilize the working class to support New York’s school bus drivers!” Strikers were enthusiastic to discuss a strategy to break the isolation of the strike and fight to defend their jobs and living standards.

School bus drivers and matrons who spoke to the WSWWS explained that a driver with nine years seniority makes around \$22—or about \$700 a week in take home

pay—while a matron with 12 years makes \$15 an hour or \$397 a week after taxes. Such wages, they explained, were barely enough to survive in New York, one of the most expensive cities in which to live in the world.

Kennedy Romelus, a school bus employee for 14 years who was picketing said, “Mayor Bloomberg and the people on the top don’t care about the children and the workers—we’re always at the bottom. The matrons are earning \$19-20,000 a year and a lot are single moms. The drivers make \$35,000. That’s poverty in a city like New York where the rent and the cost of living is constantly going up.”

“We are standing up for the safety of the kids. We know our students; we are trained to work with special education kids. If they get out of control we handle them much better than the police can because we are trained. If you slug a kid, they won’t respond. We treat the kids well and they are so happy when they see us—we’re like their parents.”

Ed, a driver with nearly 20 years, said, “None of us took these jobs to get rich. We are dedicated to the children. Bloomberg just doesn’t have the computer chip in his brain to understand that not everybody is just out for the money. All we want to do is put a roof over our heads, be able to go the doctor when we are sick and put food on our tables.

“The board of education wants to get rid of us so they can bring in low-paying, untrained drivers. They want to take away our job security. I wish I had all the letters from the school board thanking us for being the best drivers. Now they’re giving us the shaft.”

Workers were angered that school bus drivers and teachers who played such an essential role in the lives of children were being denied the right to a decent standard of living.

“I don’t know a lot about politics,” Ed added. I grew up on TV programs like ‘Bonanza’ and ‘Car 54, Where Are You?,’ where people always did the right thing. I was naïve. The world doesn’t work like that. Bloomberg is picking on teachers and school bus drivers who do the right thing.

“I drive in some of the most beat-up neighborhoods in the city, like Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. But when the kids come off the streets and go into the schools they find a clean and welcoming place. The teachers do the best they can for these children, but now Bloomberg wants to use standardized tests to get rid of them. Low test scores aren’t the fault of the teachers. How can you focus on your schoolwork if you come from a neighborhood where

there are bullets flying or a dysfunctional family.

“I’d like to see Bloomberg try to teach a classroom of 30-40 kids or have to get up at 4 in the morning to start your shift as a school bus driver. He’d never do it.

“Instead he is flying his private jet to the Bahamas every weekend. It’s like he’s a god or a king and we’re the little serfs who are supposed to be happy when they throw a few crumbs of bread off their table to us.

“These kids are not some packages that you just deliver. They are someone’s child and the whole world to a parent. We might not look it but when you see a construction crew they look kind of raggedy too. But the workers build the entire city. We transport the child every day like clockwork.”

Anna Beltre said, “I have to wake up at 3:30 in the morning to get here on time; then I work all day and don’t get home until 7 p.m. Sometimes you’re freezing in the bus. And you hardly make enough to pay the rent. I have three children I’m putting through college too.

“Bloomberg doesn’t think about that. Sometimes the special education kids pull your hair while you’re driving. But you have to be patient and teach them to feel comfortable in the bus. We’re like family to these children.”

Another driver said, “The mayor doesn’t want any more poor people living in the city. The new drivers are supposed to start at \$14 an hour and not get any medical insurance until they work two-and-a-half years. It used to be 30 days.

“I have a son who had a bad asthma attack after Hurricane Sandy and all the mold it caused. It cost \$700 for the ambulance to take him to the hospital. The union paid a little but everything else came out of my pocket and that was before the rest of the medical bills.

“To live here we have to pay high bridge tolls, housing and food costs. In New York, even a little bag of groceries costs you \$100. I’m a single mom and I had to pay \$5,000 for my son’s braces because dental coverage only takes care of cleanings. How can you afford all of this on \$14 an hour?

“Mayor Bloomberg wants to turn the clock backwards and fire teachers and school bus drivers any time he wants to.”



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