

School bus drivers in New York face NLRB threat as strike enters second week

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As the strike of New York City school bus drivers fighting for job security enters its second week, the federal National Labor Relations Board has begun its investigation of employer complaints aimed at forcing the drivers back to work. The companies claim that they are a secondary party to the strike, and are being penalized for a dispute between the administration of Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the union representing the drivers, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181.

According to a report on the SchoolBook website (www.schoolbook.org), the Brooklyn office of the NLRB has begun interviewing the city, the union and the bus companies. Although other news reports had suggested that an NLRB ruling was possible or even likely within a day, regional NLRB director James Paulsen said it might not come until next week.

In Paulsen's words, "Sometimes it takes time to get people and their evidence." If the NLRB upholds the bus companies' complaints, it could then hold an administrative hearing and seek an injunction ordering the drivers and bus attendants back to work.

The WSWs spoke to picketing bus drivers and matrons among a crowd of several hundred determined strikers at a bus depot in the East New York section of Brooklyn before dawn on Tuesday.

Circling the desolate block in 20-degree temperatures, workers expressed their deep concern over what would happen if they were to lose the already limited guarantees of the Employee Protection Provision (EPP), which maintains pay scale, seniority rights and pensions in the event the city awards contracts to different private bus companies on the basis of the lowest bid.

Several of the matrons, some with as many as 26 years experience, expressed fear for their jobs. "If we don't have the EPP, we'll lose our jobs in June," said

one. "The new companies will hire cheaper, untrained drivers and matrons. Who else will do the work we do for less than we make now, which is only \$15/hour? Whether you've worked for six years, or 26 years, it's still only \$15/hour."

Jean Calmey, a driver for 20 years, also was anxious about losing his pension and health benefits. "How will I start over? I am 60 years old. I am a trained driver with certification, but who will hire me at my age? But I can't retire without a pension."

Another driver, Jean Pierre, with 25 years service, said that he had already been forced to change companies twice, "because a worker has no choice but to go where the work is." But without the EPP he didn't know what he would do. "The conditions we see here are going to be like Germany in the 1930s. But the fire that could spark here will spread around the world."

The guarantees of the EPP were gained as a result of a 13-week strike in 1979. In September, 2011 New York Governor Cuomo vetoed a bill requiring that new contracts—which are signed by the city's Department of Education with private bus companies each year—maintain the EPP. Cuomo's veto came after complaints by New York's billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg, who claimed the cost of bus service for city public school children was spiraling "out of control," citing an increase from \$100 million in 1979 to \$1.1 billion today.

Bloomberg, in the last year of his third four-year term as mayor, has a net worth of more than \$25 billion. This parasite demands that workers who earn \$25,000 annually—*one millionth* of his wealth—pay for the economic crisis created by the Wall Street bankers. Bloomberg could personally cover the annual cost of daily bus transportation for the 150,000 New York City

public and parochial school children, many of whom have special needs, and still be a billionaire 25 times over.

If the cost of bus transportation services is inflated—and indeed at more than \$7,300 per pupil New York City pays more than any other US city to transport only a small fraction of its school children, most of whom walk or use public transportation—it is not the fault of the drivers and matrons, who earn an average salary of \$35,000 a year, not much above the poverty level for a family of four.

Instead of the supposed benefits of “free-competition” lowering the costs, the city’s use of private bus companies has resulted in an inefficient, irrational system of routes, exacerbated by the closing of public schools and their replacement with charter schools, and tightly controlled by a handful of for-profit companies

In fact, the Department of Education has not put contracts up for open bids for most of the past 33 years, instead renewing sweetheart deals with yearly “cost-of-business” increases with the same handful of businesses.

Despite the inefficient system of school bus transportation, the work of the drivers and matrons is absolutely crucial for tens of thousands of students, especially those in special education. Many of these students often develop close ties to the drivers and attendants who are in charge of getting them safely to school.

One driver said, “We don’t want to be out here on strike. We miss the kids. We know they are suffering; their families are suffering too. In this, no one is the winner. The only winner is Bloomberg. And where did he get all his money? He has \$26 billion and he says *we* make too much! I can’t see him getting up at 4 in the morning and driving a bus for \$35K a year!”

Bus driver Simon Baptiste said, “We *must* win this fight. This strike is about our lives. Our jobs, our healthcare, our pensions are all based on the EPP. Bloomberg is a multi-billionaire. Even if he lost 99.9 percent of his money he’d *still* be a millionaire. I’m sure 99 percent of the company owners are millionaires too. Meanwhile if we lose our jobs, it’s electricity that gets shut off, mortgages that don’t get paid, milk that doesn’t get bought.”



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