Why the New York Times backs Bloomberg's assault on school bus drivers

Bill Van Auken
24 January 2013

The strike by some 8,800 school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics entered its second week Wednesday with New York City's Mayor Michael Bloomberg rejecting any negotiations.

The billionaire mayor is prepared to see 150,000 children—a third of them special education students with disabilities—deprived of bus service for the remaining five months of the school year in order to strip bus workers of their jobs, wages and pensions.

Bloomberg is demanding the scrapping of a practice that has existed for decades, known as the Employee Protection Provision, or EPP, which ensures that private companies winning bids for school bussing hire experienced workers at their previous pay rates.

The arrangement, codified in a court agreement following a 13-week strike in 1979, ensured uninterrupted and safe school bus service until Bloomberg decided to deliberately misrepresent a recent court decision so as to claim that the protections must be terminated and the policy of awarding contracts to the lowest bidders allowed to operate unhindered.

Now, the *New York Times*, America's voice of establishment liberalism, has lined up squarely behind the mayor. Entitled "The School Bus Mess," its editorial published Wednesday declares New York's school transportation system "one of the most inefficient… in the country," placing the lion's share of the blame on "a labor agreement that undermines competitive bidding."

"Mayor Michael Bloomberg has finally had enough," the *Times* declares enthusiastically, noting that "uncompetitive labor agreements are the main focus of the mayor's reform efforts." It urges the mayor not to let up in his attack.

"The strike has been painful," the editorial states. "But the city will need to hold its ground if it wants to bring runaway costs under control and genuine competition to the bidding process."

This is a familiar tune. A frontal assault on a section of the working class is called a "reform." The same word is used to describe the nationwide attack on public education driven by the Obama administration's "Race to the Top."

What is most striking about the editorial is what it completely ignores—the workers themselves. That nearly 9,000 workers, their families and children could be thrown into the street, faced with unemployment, the loss of homes and poverty is a non-issue. It is as if they were a disposable commodity, or didn't even exist.

The workers get the message. As one driver told us: "I'm just getting by as things are. I feel like a dog who's been taken from his home for a long ride and kicked out into the street."

That these workers, many of whom have 20 years or more experience working with children—many of them disabled—and driving under some of the most difficult conditions in the country, are to be replaced for half their current salaries or less is taken for granted.

The safety of children driven by new-hires paid little more than the minimum wage is likewise a matter of indifference. It's a safe bet that few members of the *Times* editorial board are sending their kids to New York City public schools.

Nothing has exposed the immense chasm of social inequality that pervades life in New York City and the entire country more starkly than the school bus struggle. It pits a mayor said to be worth $25 billion against a group of workers who scrape by on an average salary of $34,000 in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

The obscene quantities of wealth accumulated by

© World Socialist Web Site

Mayor Bloomberg and his 75 fellow New York City billionaires would suffice to pay the current annual salaries of the nearly 9,000 bus workers for the next eight centuries.

In an attempt to muddy the waters and conceal this stark class divide, the *Times* invokes union corruption. Indeed, the union, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1181, was long dominated by mobsters, with its former president jailed in 2006 and its current head a longtime member of the old regime. As in "cleaner" unions, these officials pursued their own interests at the workers' expense. The drivers, matrons and mechanics neither benefited from nor are responsible for the corruption.

In all of the attempts to blackguard the workers for union and bus company corruption, the *Times* and other media are curiously silent about the politicians who gladly accepted the union's endorsements and campaign contributions, not to mention the private equity firm Greenwich Street Capital that bought up the biggest school bus firm, Atlantic Express. Presumably, the billions of dollars handled by such institutions of finance capital washes all money clean.

Just a day before egging Bloomberg on in his bid to smash the school bus drivers, the *Times* hailed President Barack Obama's inauguration speech for offering "a robust articulation of modern liberalism in America." The ugly face of "modern liberalism" can be seen on the cold sidewalks of New York, where school bus workers are fighting for their jobs against a billionaire mayor backed by the liberal establishment.

It is a "liberalism" that is directed entirely—as reflected in Obama's inauguration speech—to the concerns of a privileged middle class layer, promoting identity politics based on race, gender and sexual orientation, while seeking to hide the overriding issues of class division, social inequality and the exploitation of the working class.

What is taking place in New York City will be played out in many different forms across the country as—from the Obama administration on down—the claim is made that the "fiscal crisis" demands the destruction of jobs, wages and core social programs such as Social Security and Medicare. The policies of both Democrats and Republicans are directed at making the working class pay for the crisis created by Bloomberg's associates on Wall Street.

The defense of the school bus workers is of vital importance to the working class not only in New York, but throughout the US. They are defying a financial aristocracy and both of its political parties, while battling to defend not only their own jobs and living standards, but the right of children to decent and safe transportation.

This is a political struggle. Its victory requires the broadest mobilization of working people in New York City and nationally to challenge the stranglehold exercised by Wall Street over the resources of society. The official unions, from ATU Local 1181 to the AFL-CIO, reject such a struggle, instead working to subordinate the interests of the workers to the Democratic Party and the capitalist system.

The attack on school bus drivers and other sections of the working class can be answered only through the development of an independent political movement of the working class based on a socialist program.

As a crucial step in this struggle, the Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees of bus workers, parents and students to take over the direction of the strike. These committees must serve as a means of drawing New York City transit workers, who have been without a contract for a year, teachers and every other section of workers and youth in New York and nationally into a united struggle in defense of the bus workers and the common interests of the working class as a whole.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site