

Striking New York school bus drivers face government and media gang up

Sandy English
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As they enter the second week of their strike, New York City school bus drivers have faced increasing pressure from the administration of Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the corporate media. The drivers, members of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181, transport over 150,000 children from public and parochial schools to and from school each day. Many of these children have special needs and require care from drivers and matrons on board.

The approximately 8,800 drivers, mechanics and matron/attendants were forced out on strike by the city's Department of Education (DOE) when it put up two requests for bids for third-party bus companies that do not contain an Employee Protection Provision (EPP). The EPP guarantees seniority wages scales to drivers regardless of which company they work for. It has been in place since the 1960s, and drivers defended this right in a 13-week strike in 1979.

Bloomberg claims that a 2011 court ruling makes it illegal for the city to include the EPP in the requests for bids for bus contractors in June. Without the EPP, bus companies will be able to submit cut-rate bids that eliminate older, more experienced drivers and replace them with low-wage, inexperienced drivers.

The multibillionaire Bloomberg, a man who unites in the same person a government of the super-rich and vast wealth itself, refused to negotiate with the drivers' union. The bus companies have sought a ruling from the national Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to declare the strike illegal.

As of Thursday, the local NLRB had finished assembling evidence in the case and sent the material to Washington, D.C. According to media reports as of this writing, a ruling has been made, but its contents have yet to be revealed. Even if the NLRB rules the strike illegal, it will still need to get a court injunction to

order drivers back to work.

On Wednesday, the DOE amended the language of its bid to allow bus companies that it has hired to start before September. This means that the city is trying to replace the drivers more quickly than it originally planned. Since the city's provocation has impacted some of the poorest families in New York, the DOE was forced to announce plans to give vouchers to parents who must take their children to school in cabs or liveries instead of making provisions for reimbursement only.

Also on Wednesday, the *New York Times* published an editorial that supported Bloomberg's drive to cut costs, while completely ignoring the fate of the workers who would lose their jobs and benefits amidst the highest unemployment since the Great Depression. (See "Why the New York Times backs Bloomberg's assault on school bus drivers")

The corporate-owned media widely broadcast news that 11 school buses owned by Reliant Transportation had been vandalized at a garage in Brooklyn on Wednesday. *The Daily News* proclaimed that the "knives had come out," seeking to create a witch-hunting atmosphere against strikers.

The leadership of Local 1181 could only emphasize in response how polite and harmless it was. Jimmy Hedge, a member of the local's executive board told the media that "we're conducting a civil strike. We're moving away from the driveways" when scab buses enter and leave garages.

The union bureaucracy participated in a protest at the headquarters of the DOE on Wednesday in the company of Democratic Party politicians to pressure the mayor to return to bargaining. No politician could summon up the courage to defend the drivers, and none could place the blame for the harm that is being done to

tens of thousands of the city's most vulnerable children squarely at the door of Bloomberg.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to pickets at the Atlantic Express garage in the Bronx Thursday.

Like other picket lines in this strike, the union has made no provision to give even minimal comforts to strikers, such as hot coffee or port-a-potties in the extremely cold weather. Nevertheless, we found that workers were more interested in information about the strike than anything else.

Anthony, a bus driver with 10 years' experience, remarked on the lack of reliable information: "They tell us that buses are getting inspected so they will be ready if we go back to work, but nothing has changed," he said. "The union is supposed to go to court tomorrow. That is the rumor."

He added: "I thought that this would be a long strike because the Mayor is not even listening to any offers. But if we don't have the safety of the EPP, we don't have a job."

One matron with seven years' experience told us: "I have two children who are now paras working in schools in Astoria in Queens and Kingsbridge in the Bronx. They talk about how so many kids can't have transportation and about teachers losing jobs. The kids need transportation and education.

"To stay in this situation in a strike in general is not good. We only have medical benefits to January 31, I was told. Nobody answered at the union when we called about the insurance."

Another matron added, "The government has money. What is going on with the working people? Are the children with special needs not going to go to school for five months? What about their parents? How can they take care of their children? They can't stay home."

Abraham Polanco told the WSWS. "At 55 years of age, where am I going to get hired, if they take my job? Why does Bloomberg want to do this to people like us? What they need to do is create jobs, not take away what we have.

"They take all these taxes from us to support the city. Who takes all that money? It doesn't come to us. They have to lower rent and expenses. How can they talk about lowering wages? Everything is political. We aren't asking for a raise, just for job security. You need a secure job so you can retire with dignity.

"The rich get control. The Democrats and

Republicans work together. The millionaires want to put their money to work, to invest. They need workers. But when it comes to politics, there is nothing beneficial for the working people."



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