

South Carolina board authorizes strikebreaking against school bus drivers

Rosa Shahnazarian**26 January 2013**

On Wednesday, South Carolina's State Board of Education voted unanimously, 10-0, to allow Durham School Services to hire scabs from other states to transport children for up to 90 days in two school districts if unionized bus drivers and monitors go on strike.

The strike-breaking measure was the only item on the agenda at Wednesday's board meeting. It was prompted by strike authorization votes by unionized school bus drivers and monitors in both the Charleston County School District and Summerville's Dorchester County School District 2, who voted unanimously to strike if negotiations fail between Teamsters Local 509 officials and their employer, Illinois-based Durham School Services.

Charleston County Durham workers voted 186-0 in favor of a strike on January 15, while Dorchester School District 2 workers voted 77-0 this week for strike action. These workers have been without a contract since August, though the union says it has met with Durham management 35 times since July. Teamsters Local 509 President L.D. Fletcher has not yet set any deadline for a deal.

Beaufort County drivers, who also work for Durham School Services and belong to Local 509, are expected to take a strike authorization vote soon. About 620 Durham bus drivers and attendants are unionized in all three districts and this would be the first strike by the workers since they joined the union. In Charleston, over a hundred drivers remain outside the union and in Dorchester 2 about 40 remain outside.

Workers in Dorchester, Charleston and Beaufort County were able to join the Teamsters because their employer, Durham School Services, is a private company. Durham, the second-largest provider of student transportation services in the US, is a subsidiary

of National Express Group, a profitable multinational corporation based in Britain.

Bus drivers and attendants in every other South Carolina school district are barred by state law from striking and collective bargaining because they are public sector employees.

The state government provides buses and pays for fuel, and individual districts employ bus drivers and manage bus routes. Dorchester, Charleston and Beaufort counties hired Durham after changes in state law in recent years allowed districts to outsource their responsibilities.

These changes are part of a continuing effort in state government, led by Republican Governor Nikki Haley, to privatize the bus system. South Carolina is the only state that owns and maintains a statewide bus fleet, though many of the buses have been in use since the mid-1980s.

None of the efforts in the state government to privatize the school bus system are aimed at better conditions for workers. Rather, they are aimed at serving the interests of private companies, while divesting districts of the responsibility to pay for workers' benefits.

The *Independent Mail* reports that Katie McClure, Charleston County transportation director, said that the county is saving money by not paying for drivers' health care and retirement benefits, or for lawsuit liability. She claims that Durham School Services has better driver retention than local counties that do not contract with private companies, largely as a result of better pay.

Low school bus driver retention has been a problem in the state for over a decade. In 2000, a private consultant told the state Department of Education that the turnover rate of bus drivers and attendants was high

by comparison with workers in other state agencies. It attributed the turnover rate to low pay, finding that over 5,000 school district drivers earned an average of only \$8.55 per hour, 17 percent less than bus drivers employed by other various state agencies.

According to an article in the *Augusta Chronicle* last January, Teamsters Local 509 workers' current contracts guarantee that drivers now earn between \$10.50 and \$19.25 per hour in Beaufort County, and \$12 to \$19 in Charleston County. The *Chronicle* also reported that in some rural districts, pay still averaged only \$9 an hour.

State Superintendent of Education Mick Zais pledged his support for the strike-breaking plan on Wednesday. Saying state officials are powerless to defend the workers, he is posing as a defender of parents who would find it difficult to get their children to school in the event of a strike and appealed to workers to refrain from strike action.

In reality, Zais has no interest in defending either the workers or the students and families that are affected by high bus driver turnover in much of the state. Any reduction in pay of workers at Durham would likely result in a return to previous low rates of driver retention.

On Wednesday, the Charleston County School District pleaded with the State Department of Education to relax regulations for strike-breakers, arguing that "due to the timing and uncertainty of the strike, there will not be enough time to certify an adequate number of new bus drivers." The district told the board it might need over 250 new drivers certified in other states.

The board complied, agreeing to temporarily waive the requirement that all drivers have 20 hours of classroom instruction and 10 hours of driving instruction. The relaxation of requirements is only authorized for 90 days. Teamsters Local 509 President Fletcher told the *Beaufort Gazette* that it is "pitiful that they have to go to the state board to ask them to break the law."

Charleston school officials claim that the drivers are currently paid an average of \$14.65 per hour and that the union has requested a roughly 44 percent pay and benefit increase in the first year of a new contract and a 20 percent increase in the two years after that. Fletcher told the *Gazette* that these figures were not accurate,

but refused to provide the correct numbers, claiming that he "want[s] to see how far they'll go with their lies."

By keeping negotiations secret, Fletcher is acting in collusion with company management to prevent any broader discussion among workers of the conditions faced by Teamsters Local 509 drivers and attendants. The union would prefer to isolate any strike that takes place.

Annette Hill, a driver in the Dorchester District 2, told the *Summerville Patch*, "We want to be treated fairly and to work in an environment that is not hostile to us. We care about the children we transport."

The *World Socialist Web Site* encourages school bus drivers and attendants in Charleston, Dorchester 2 and Beaufort to contact us about the conditions they face.



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