

New York school bus drivers remain determined as back-to-work injunction looms

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Almost 9,000 school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics continued their strike on picket lines across New York City this weekend. Only 2,689 of the city's Department of Education's (DOE) 7,700 school bus routes were running last week.

Strikers showed great determination as they picketed in freezing temperatures at dozens of bus garages. They have maintained a fighting spirit in the face of media and government hostility as well as the indifference shown by the official so-called labor movement in the city.

The union that represents the workers, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181, is set to resume negotiations with the school bus companies on Monday. While Mayor Michael Bloomberg organized the negotiations, it is unclear exactly what will be discussed. Bloomberg insists that the city will not participate, and it is the city's actions that have given rise to the strike. Local 1181 President Michael Cordiello urged the mayor to "join us at the table to work towards ending this strike."

Bloomberg provoked the strike on January 16 when he removed the Employee Protection Provision (EPP) from the DOE's bids for service from private, third-party bus contractors for 1,100 of the DOE's approximately 7,700 bus routes. The EPP has insured seniority protection for workers since the mid-1960s.

Without the EPP, bus companies will be able to pay workers drastically lower wages. Drivers successfully defended the EPP during a 13-week strike in 1979. EPP guaranteed safe school service and required those private companies that won bids for school bus service to hire experienced workers at their previous rates.

Bloomberg, however, is deliberately misinterpreting a 2011 court ruling to claim that EPP must be eliminated. Without EPP, bus companies will be entitled to enforce cut rate bids that eliminate experienced drivers and replace them with lower wage inexperienced drivers.

The mayor, whose own personal fortune is over \$25

billion, is willing to see over 150,000 children—54,000 of whom are special education students with disabilities—go without bus service for the remaining five months of the school year. School attendance has naturally suffered since the strike began on January 16; some special needs schools have seen their attendance decrease by 20 percent.

Along with hostility from the corporate media and the entire political establishment, the bus drivers are now faced with the possibility of a back-to-work court injunction. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) recently completed an investigation into the strike after being requested to do so by the school bus companies, which claim they are secondary victims of a walkout aimed at the Bloomberg administration. Media reports have indicated a decision is expected early this week. If the strike is ruled illegal the NLRB will go to Brooklyn federal court to seek the injunction.

The bus companies and the DOE are looking to break the strike in every way they can. The DOE and the mayor's office are asking companies whose drivers are not striking to collect students and train new workers in CPR and other necessary certifications in order to scab on the strike.

The trade unions in the city have issued perfunctory pledges of solidarity to the striking drivers. In the twisted language of these decayed and anti-worker organizations, declarations of "solidarity" and "support" means that they will work to isolate the drivers' strike from the millions of workers who support them and seek to conceal the underlying political issues.

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT), which has over 80,000 members in the 1.1 million-student New York City school district, has not even issued an official statement regarding the bus drivers' strike. It has been left up to the UFT's Movement of Rank and File Educators (MORE) caucus to, in the most groveling manner, "implore the Mayor to bargain in good faith."

On Saturday a team of *World Socialist* reporters spoke to pickets in the Bronx.

Yoselam, a 56-year-old driver with 13 years' experience, had this to say: "What am I going to do now? How am I going to pay the bills? And look at the money [Bloomberg's] got! He's got money to play around with. He doesn't understand what we have to go through.

"There is so much we have to think about when driving a bus. School staff and parents, the kids, everyone—and I don't have a matron helping me. Seventy percent of the company here are women. We have to drive the kids all around the city and into Manhattan where we can get no parking. And we can't even stop to use the bathroom. We have to stay in traffic. And if anything goes wrong with the bus, like if a light goes out, we have to pay for it out of our own pockets.

"If we have an accident on the bus they make us do a drug test. And we have to take classes seven or eight times a year. We have to do road tests, CPR, everything. We are not getting paid while we are doing this. Our lives are controlled by the Board of Education. They want to let us go, hire new workers, so they'll only have to pay them seven dollars an hour.

"Last week we marched to the City Hall meeting with other strikers in the Bronx. There were city councilmen there. They were saying it was illegal to strike. We showed them proof that it was not illegal. We are not talking about salary here. We are talking about protection. We need to be protected."

Wesley Drumgold, who has been driving for over 10 years, told the WSWs: "We're fighting for job security. We're not asking for a wage increase. You can't tell someone after 15 or 20 years to go back to \$7.25 an hour. It's not going to happen.

"We're fighting for it ourselves. We went to City Hall on our own last week. We said 'Let's march.' So we went along Zerega Avenue and got all the pickets along the way to Westchester Ave. united." The mile and a half stretch along Zerega Avenue in the Bronx is home to more than half a dozen bus yards with picketing workers. Then we said let's take it downtown. The union didn't want us to do it. But they showed up for photo shoots then left."

Laura Angelo, who has been driving a bus for 13 years, told the WSWs that she could have lost her job and health insurance several times after her bus runs were dropped by the DOE. Only the EPP protected her.

On January 31, health care coverage expires for striking workers. Laura explained what is at stake: "I just had a

thyroid biopsy. ~~Our~~ insurance ends on Thursday and I don't get results until Friday. I don't want to think about it if it comes back positive... I'm getting emotional because we're talking about my life."

Laura's mother is also dependent on the health coverage guaranteed by the EPP. "She's 71 and can't afford to retire. She has a lot of medical problems—diabetes, high blood pressure and only one kidney—and takes a ton of medication three times a day. After the 31st, she has no way to pay for her medicine. That's what's keeping her alive."

Laura added that she knew of a matron who may be forced to postpone heart surgery because of the lack of medical coverage after the 31st.

"Bloomberg claims we are the ones putting kids in jeopardy," she continued. "How dare he bring up the kids? We're the ones who spend five days a week, 40 weeks of the year with them. When I put a kid on a bus, they're my responsibility. At the end of the school year I get a little depressed. I want to give the kids a hug, even though I can't because of the rules. Some have Down's Syndrome or are autistic; they need consistency. One kid left his stuffed animal on the bus at the end of the year and I drove it back in my own car on my own time. His parents were so happy they were crying, thanking me. How dare Bloomberg say that we don't care about the kids!

"He wants to dictate. He's setting up Lego houses, he's dictating how much soda we can drink." After discussing the role of both political parties with us, she added, "I almost don't want to vote. The politicians, once they're elected they turn against you. They're like wolves in sheep's clothing."



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