

New York school bus companies threaten to bring in scabs

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New York City's school bus companies have threatened to begin using scabs to break the two-week-old strike in defense of jobs and decent transportation for 150,000 school children. A spokesperson for the bus companies said that replacement drivers and matrons had completed training and that some would begin crossing picket lines on Tuesday.

The announcement came after Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1811 and a consortium of bus companies that contract services to New York City's Department of Education (DOE) held talks at Gracie Mansion, the official mayoral residence in upper Manhattan.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg had proposed the talks, but neither attended nor sent any representative. Bloomberg sparked the strike when he removed employee job protections from requests for bids for services from bus companies that transport over 100,000 public school and 50,000 parochial schoolchildren. There are over 7,700 bus routes in the New York City system.

Without the protections (known as the EPP), bus companies will no longer be obligated to hire experienced drivers and can submit proposals for service to the city at far lower pay rates, cutting drivers' wages.

Bloomberg's decision to issue the bids—he has made the false claim that the employee protection provision is illegal under a recent court decision—is a frontal attack on the jobs of the 8,800 school bus workers, most of whom stand to be laid off and replaced with drivers earning close to the minimum wage. The EPP has been a part of the city's requests for bids since the 1960s, and was defended by the drivers in a three-month strike in 1979.

Tens of thousands of children have been unable to get

to school because of the strike forced upon the drivers. Some children with autism, physical handicaps and other challenging conditions have been particularly affected. The drivers and matrons who accompany them provide a high level of care and attention and are often well known to their parents.

The DOE has offered vouchers for parents to take their children to school in taxis and limousines. Most New York City schoolchildren come from families who could not afford to pay for a taxi for one day, much less the two weeks of the strike that have so far elapsed. They also cannot afford to pay for a taxi while waiting for reimbursement. Parents are required to make the trip to schools to pick up vouchers and many services do not accept the vouchers or are unaware of the makeshift program.

The meeting held in Grace Mansion had a farcical character, given the city's refusal to enter into any discussions on retaining the EPP. Many workers on the picket lines questioned why the union would bother to meet with the bus companies when nothing could be accomplished without a shift on the part of the Bloomberg administration. The mediator selected was the 93-year-old former judge, Milton Mollen. It was Mollen who served as mediator back in 1979, working out the agreement that kept the EPP in subsequent contracts for more than three decades under what is referred to as the Mollen agreement.

The bus companies, while going through the motions of meeting with the union on Monday, have filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which could rule the strike illegal. The NLRB is expected to announce its decision later this week and, if it finds for the bus companies, to seek a back-to-work injunction from the federal district court in Brooklyn.

Drivers, matrons and mechanics are continuing to

picket at bus garages throughout the city's outer boroughs. Striking bus drivers also picketed in front of the DOE's office in lower Manhattan in the wintry sleet on Monday. The relatively small number of approximately 25 drivers and matrons expressed frustration that their struggle is being isolated by the press that the union leadership has refused to call on other sections of city workers to turn out in support.

One driver told the WSWS, "We were told that we were here as a 'presence' but we need to be more than just a presence. Today it is the drivers, but tomorrow it will be the teachers or some other city workers that will be losing their jobs. Anyone who works for the city should be out here, instead of just this small group. All of us should be out here together."

Sherry Salino, a driver for 15 years for one bus company and a matron with another company for two years before that, said that the city might be accepting the new bids without the EPP as early as February 11 and that workers would be losing their medical coverage at the end of this week. Other than taking things one day at a time, she had no idea what she would do.

Vivian, a matron who has worked for the same company for 14 years, said she makes under \$30,000 a year, and that "in this city, with the price of gas, food and housing, I'm poor!" She also explained the irrationality of the way the routes were laid out, without any input from the drivers.

"The DOE sets the routes and then the bus companies bid on them. Sometimes I have to pass one stop to pick up a kid further away and then come back later. So instead of taking 5 minutes, it takes an hour and a half. The bigger buses make only a few stops and pick up 10 to 15 kids at a time. But because we drive the kids with special needs (in mini-vans), we have to stop at each house. You can end up with a run with only a few kids on the bus, picking up a kid from Coney Island and taking him all the way across Brooklyn to Williamsburg, even though there might have been another route that was closer. I have absolutely no idea how they decide—they never ask us. A route may be perfectly mapped out, but then the DOE changes it at the last minute. We don't know if the schools are public schools or charters, sometimes we don't even know the name of the school!"



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