Companies bring in scabs in New York school bus drivers' strike

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On Tuesday, private school bus companies contracted to the New York City Department of Education (DOE) sought to break the two-week strike of 8,800 drivers, matrons (children's attendants), and mechanics by using scabs to cross the picket line. The Staten Island Bus Company sent out 68 school buses from its yard on Meredith Avenue, allegedly driving 59 of the 113 routes that the DOE has contracted to it.

The buses were driven by members of another non-striking union, United Service Workers Local 355, accompanied by other drivers who had been hastily trained to serve as scab matrons. The matrons at the company are members of Amalgamated Transit Union 1181, which represents the 8,800 strikers.

The scabbing was carried out in direct collaboration with the administration of New York's billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, which issued an emergency order last week allowing matrons to be put on buses with only four hours of special training, instead of the usual 20.

Striking workers gathered outside the yard to express their outrage and were forced to stand behind barricades with a heavy police presence. One driver got out of his bus and refused to cross the picket line, to the resounding cheers of the strikers.

Strikers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that additional United Craft and Industrial Workers Union Local 91 drivers from the Little Richie bus company are being forced to do runs from Stillwell Avenue yards in Brooklyn and Hunts Point in the Bronx. These drivers are being threatened with the loss of their jobs unless they cross the picket lines.

Many other drivers who are not members of Local 1181 have refused to cross picket lines, called in sick or sought early retirement. There is broad support for the strike throughout the city, including among teachers and transit workers in the city's Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA).

Bloomberg provoked the strike when he instructed the DOE to issues bids for service for next year's school bus contract that eliminated a critical clause known as the Employee Protection Provision (EPP). The EPP guarantees the jobs of bus drivers regardless of which companies win the bids, requiring them to hire the existing workers based on seniority rights in terms of both wages and picking their routes. Without the EPP, bus companies will be able to slash wages to minimal levels.

Drivers, matrons and mechanics will lose their jobs or be forced to work at far lower wages. Bloomberg falsely claimed that a 2011 ruling by the New York State Court of Appeals made inclusion of the EPP in DOE bids illegal.

The city operates 7,700 bus routes and transports 100,000 public school children and another 50,000 parochial school children. Over a third of these are special needs students who are bound to wheelchairs or are autistic. The impact in their lives and those of their parents, some of whom live at the poverty level, has been incalculable. Normally bus drivers and matrons have a close relationship with the children they transport.

Many of the scab buses sent out on Tuesday were virtually empty, owing in large measure to concerns of parents about entrusting their children to untrained and unknown strike-breakers.

A ruling by the National Labor Relations Board is expected this week, which could force the drivers back to work.

Bloomberg, one of wealthiest people on the planet, has made a frontal assault on the living standards and

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social rights of these workers. It is widely recognized in the city that other sections of the working class can expect similar treatment. Bloomberg has been unable to negotiate an agreement with the teachers' union that would enshrine student test scores in teacher evaluations and give the DOE broad latitude in firing senior teachers.

Transit workers have been working without a contact for over a year; negotiations are at a standstill because of the concessions the MTA is asking from workers.

In the bus drivers' strike and the attacks on city workers, the official trade unions have played an indispensable role in keeping each struggle isolated and under the political thumb of the Democrats and Republicans.

As with the auto industry, which the Obama Administration bailed out in 2008 in return for cutting in half the wages of new hires, the ruling elite could not dream of dismantling such social rights as jobs, education, healthcare, and a secure retirement without the help of the so-called unions.

Local 1181 has been complicit with Bloomberg in wearing the strikers down, withholding information from them, and attempting to demoralize them. After first saying that it would only meet with Bloomberg, the local agreed to mediation on Monday with the bus companies and without the participation of the city.

Many drivers saw this as a betrayal and question what it is that the union is discussing with the bus companies, which have no control over the maintenance of the EPP.

The trade unions seek to divide the working class in the city. Not only in Staten Island, but also at other school bus companies, they are telling their members to cross the drivers' picket lines.

Striker Jesse Matais at a garage in Astoria, Queens, told the WSWS: "Teamsters 854 and Laborers Local 91 organize school bus drivers also, but they are still working. They are scabs. These unions stood shoulder to shoulder with us at the rally at the beginning of the strike. They said they would stand with us and support us during the strike. They ordered their workers to drive despite our picket lines. What kind of union is that?"

Another driver at the yard, Wando Alvarez, with 12 years' experience remarked: "The reason Bloomberg is still strong is because each group of workers is fighting him separately. Now they are attacking our jobs and wages. But even though everyone else is in the same situation, no one is helping us."

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