

Union officials offer to end NY school bus strike and negotiate concessions

A reporting team
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Amalgamated Transit Union International President Larry Hanley and Michael Cordiello, the president of ATU Local 1181, representing 8,800 striking New York City school bus drivers and matrons, told a press conference on Wednesday morning that the union had offered to order its members back to work while it attempted to negotiate “cost savings” with the city and the bus companies.

The proposal to end the strike in exchange for a 60-to-90-day “cooling off” period was made on Monday at Gracie Mansion, the official residence of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, where talks between the bus companies and the union took place. Bloomberg made Gracie Mansion available but refused to participate or to send a representative.

The union’s offer was brought to the administration by 93-year-old retired judge Milton Mollen, serving as a mediator. It was flatly rejected by the city. Bloomberg showed no interest in a conditional surrender by the union, demanding instead unconditional submission and the destruction of all of the past gains of the school bus workers. Bloomberg demands an end to the Employee Protection Provision (EPP) in new bids, which will mean huge pay cuts and other attacks for experienced workers, along with the hiring of inexperienced and untrained drivers and bus attendants.

The use of scabs continued for a second day on Wednesday. Local 1181 President Cordiello told the news conference that buses crossing the picket line in Staten Island were staffed by drivers who had been told by the city’s Department of Education that if they did not train and work as matrons their drivers’ certificates would be revoked and they would be fired.

Both Cordiello and Hanley made it clear that the union has no strategy outside of appealing to Bloomberg’s conscience. At one point Hanley, asked how the union intended to go forward, said, “We hope that you, the press, will get the story out to the people of New York.” This follows two weeks of non-stop attacks on the strikers from the media. Coverage of the strike has been quite limited in the big

business press, but attacks on the strikers have been a consistent theme, from Rupert Murdoch’s gutter-level *New York Post* to the pompous editorials in the liberal *New York Times*.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to strikers on the picket line in Staten Island on Wednesday. A group of strikers who work in Brooklyn but live in Staten Island and New Jersey were also on the picket line to help the Staten Island Atlantic Express strikers, and spoke to the WSWS.

Al (Alcides) Rivera commented about the news of Bloomberg turning down a union negotiating offer, “The point is Bloomberg is saying there is no money on the table, so how can our delegates make a deal. The moves against workers are affecting everyone. We are just getting in front now. If they attack the middle class there will only be the richer and the poor on public assistance. My mortgage can never be lowered. So I consider myself a person who lives from check to check. If they take the EPP we can’t live. What happens if they don’t sign any union contracts for any unions? We will have to take whatever jobs they give us and to take public assistance.”

Gina Semilia was angry at the City’s pose of concern for students. “I have 5 kids. If we go out for dinner and leave my child alone, I could go to jail. How is it the Mayor could put my child in with strangers on the bus? There have been incidents on the buses.”

Grace Muniz was worried because “the medical insurance gets cut off in a couple of days. There are diabetics and others needing medication. I take medication that would cost \$185 a month. There are sick kids and asthmatics.”

Steve Rolnick, a driver with 32 years experience, explained a problem for veteran workers. “The money from the employers is not flowing into the pension funds like it should and could be cut off. In 10 years I would have nothing. If every union goes on strike with us, there would be strength. Bloomberg is doing the same to the teachers. He forces out the older teachers and the new teachers are cheaper. Same thing as for us. The problem is Bloomberg with all his money can’t see the working man.”

Steve elaborated on the history of the EPP: “There was job protection from 1964 when there was basically one school bus company, Varsity. But it is no more and when companies bid for contracts in 1979, we had to strike for 13 weeks. It became nasty. The same thing happened in Boston years ago. Laidlaw, now First Students, the largest school bus company in the US (Atlantic that we are picketing is second) fired all the senior drivers. The union did get a version of the EPP. If they have it in other cities and they have it here for 34 years, how can it be illegal? If they get rid of it, come September we will all be out of a job.”

Referring to the police surrounding the picket line, Steve said, “The cops have orders to grab anybody who gets out of line. That would be instant decertification the moment we are arrested. That would be hard to beat, especially since we are broke and cannot afford lawyers.”

When asked about where the strike is going, Steve responded, “This union is famous for making concessions. All unions do that. The other politicians would not change what Bloomberg does, like if you put Christine Quinn in. And Lhota is crazy, too. He can’t run the MTA, how is he going to run the city? These guys are so far at the top, they can’t conceive of what we go through. I have been transporting special needs kids for 32 years. You have to know psychology. They can be down, depressed, had an argument and need to be calmed. They become like your kids.”

A Pioneer bus company driver with 11 years service remarked, “If we go back next week, we would be making less than McDonald’s. Their pay equals \$15 an hour, and that is with medical benefits. Ours would be \$14 an hour, only for hours we work, even though we give ten and half hours of our day. Bloomberg says he is concerned for the safety of children. We are the ones who take care of them. But when he took seventh and eighth graders off of bus service and they had to walk, a seventh grade girl got killed on South Avenue on the last day of school in 2010. A third grader is now told they take a city bus by themselves. A 10-year old girl got dragged up to a building in Canarsie. Why wasn’t she in school? Because there was no Atlantic bus. And these are the same people who are cutting food stamps. We are the working people.”

Joe Caliendo is a driver with 15 years experience working for Pioneer, whose garage is in south Staten Island. He was at the Atlantic Express garage to assist the matrons on the picket line. “There are about 900 school bus workers on strike in Staten Island, and I would say about 100 drivers from Pioneer a day come up here to picket with the matrons,” he explained.

Joe raised the issue of pensions, “What would happen to my pension if they succeed in eliminating our union? The

union pension fund is federally insured, but only for 30 percent of the amount. Then if your pension should have been \$1500 a month, if you cut it down to 30 percent, this pension amount even with social security wouldn’t be enough.

“Our contract expired on December 31st, but our fight here is about the EPP. Bloomberg has put these contracts out to be bid without the EPP job guarantees. The union has, however, allowed givebacks over the last two contracts we have had. The starting pay for new drivers has been cut from \$18 to \$14 an hour, and new workers have to work for three months before they get medical benefits. These givebacks have gone straight into the owners’ pockets.”

Giuseppe Calabro has 19 years as a school bus driver for Hoyt. He came to the picket line from a different Staten Island location where he had been picketing before. He was handing out a leaflet that declared, “Okay we’ve had enough.” His wife Natalie owns a unisex hair salon where he explained that strike posters, these flyers and other strike support material is given out to one and all. He said they have gotten a big response to their campaign on social media also for the strikers. He told the WSWS, “In the city, if you can get all the unions together like the teachers, transit workers, sanitation workers museum workers and firefighters, they all don’t have a contract. If they act together, this is the way to touch the pockets of the rich.

“The mayor wants to attack the working class until they get rid of us. Then there will only be the poor and the rich. This will make the rich richer.

“They try to confuse us with religion and things like gay marriage. But the teachers have no contract, and they are closing more schools. The families are getting attacked. I hope this is clear to people.

“In our last contract we got a 3 percent wage increase. But everything keeps going up from food to rent to everything else. Now I am having trouble surviving. I came from Italy many years ago to make a better life for my family. Now I think I may have to go back to Italy because it is getting so bad here.”



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