

New York City school bus strike at the crossroads

Socialist Equality Party
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The strike of 9,000 New York City school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics, now in its third week, has reached a crucial turning point.

The workers, who went out on strike in mid-January after Mayor Michael Bloomberg moved to rip up job security and seniority provisions, are giving voice to the growing opposition of workers throughout the country.

The struggle has revealed the basic class divisions in America. The bus drivers are on one side, fighting to defend not only their own livelihoods, but the future of public education. In this battle, they are taking a stand for the whole working class. On the other side is Bloomberg, a representative of the financial elite, who sees the attack on bus workers as part of an attack on every section of the working class.

Lined up behind Bloomberg is the corporate-controlled media and the entire political establishment, Democrats as well as Republicans.

Class relations in America are summed up in the spectacle of number 10 on the *Forbes* list of richest Americans, with a fortune of \$25 billion, insisting that bus drivers making \$35,000 in one of the most expensive cities in the world are overpaid.

In recent days, some of the bus companies have begun to bring in strike-breakers. The response of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) has been to continue its policy of isolating the school bus workers from teachers and other city workers while seeking to bring an end to the strike by offering drastic concessions.

At a press conference on Wednesday, the union announced that it had proposed a 60-to-90-day “cooling off” period during which the workers would return to work while the union, the companies and the city discussed alternative “cost-saving” measures. City Hall

rejected the ATU’s offer, underscoring its determination to smash the resistance of the strikers and make an example of them.

Bloomberg has indicated that the city is prepared to wait out the strike until present contracts expire in June, and then simply hire new workers. At the same time, the National Labor Relations Board said it expected to announce a ruling this week on a complaint brought by several bus companies that could force an end to the strike.

In opposing the city’s attack, the bus drivers have shown great courage. However, the strike cannot be successful if it continues along its present path.

On the picket lines, many strikers have expressed shock that workers who perform such essential services as busing and teaching children should come under attack. But that is the reality of capitalism and the financial aristocracy that dominates American society. Financial parasites like Bloomberg have accumulated vast sums by looting public resources, gutting wages and pensions, and turning back the clock a century for working people.

No city represents this social dynamic more than New York, the home of Wall Street and nerve center of the world financial system. The economic crisis that erupted in 2008 was the result of financial speculation and criminality. When the bankers’ Ponzi schemes collapsed, Presidents Bush and Obama bailed them out with taxpayer funds.

Behind Bloomberg stands the entire corporate and political establishment, which is waging a relentless war across the country on public education and the rights of school employees. Speaking for the Democrats and the Obama administration, the *New York Times* last week called on the city to “hold its ground” against the strikers.

The strategy of the Amalgamated Transit Union and the rest of the official unions is bankrupt. The unions representing transit workers and teachers issue worthless statements of sympathy while behind the scenes they work to ensure that the school bus drivers' strike does not become the catalyst for a broader movement of the working class.

The main concern of ATU President Michael Cordiello—who made \$245,000 last year—and the rest of the union officials is to preserve the flow of dues into their coffers, no matter how low the wages of workers.

For the school bus drivers to win, they must appeal not to the big business politicians, trade union bureaucrats and other false friends, but to the millions of working people in the city who are facing the same struggle over rising living costs, falling wages and deteriorating social services. In particular, strikers should appeal to the more than 200,000 teachers and school employees who are also being targeted in the attack on public education.

There is enormous support for the strikers among parents, students and working class families. But that support must be mobilized to oppose the gang-up against the strikers. The Socialist Equality Party urges strikers to form rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the ATU and establish direct lines of communication and common struggle with teachers, transit workers, hospital workers and other sections of the working class. This is a critical first step.

But the struggle is not simply against Bloomberg. In fighting to defend their right to a secure and decent-paying job and safe transportation for the children they serve, the school bus drivers are in a fight against the entire economic and political system, which claims there is no money to meet the needs of society, while corporate profits and the stock prices hit record levels.

If the needs of the vast majority are to take precedence over the profit interests of the wealthy minority, then the working class must take political power in its own hands. Only in this way can working people—who produce society's wealth—determine how it is to be allocated.

This requires the independent political organization of the working class and the fight for a workers' government based on a socialist program. The grip of the financial elite must be broken through the

nationalization of the banks and corporations under the democratic control of the working class as part of the reorganization of economic life to meet the needs of society as a whole.



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