

Interview with a striking New York school bus driver: “We want an answer about what’s been going on”

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World Socialist Web Site reporters sat down with David, a striking school bus driver from Queens. David has been a driver for 17 years, and his wife Luz for 20 years. The couple has school-aged children, and the family lives in a modest house in Queens, much of which David rebuilt in his spare time.

The strike has entered its third week, and as of today, the companies cut off health care insurance for the workers and their families as well as payments into their pension funds. On the instigation of Department of Education and the administration of the city’s billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, they are openly hiring scabs.

We had an extensive discussion with David about the political issues in the strike, and the significance of the assault by the super-rich against the drivers, waged not only by Bloomberg, but by the Democrats, the Republicans, and the corporate media as well. We discussed the role of the trade unions and the fact that the drivers own union, Amalgamated Transit Union local 1181, had proposed to Bloomberg a back-to-work “cooling-off period” in which it was prepared to negotiate concessions.

World Socialist Web Site: Tell us what the situation is where you are picketing.

David: There are 700 buses in my yard from three different companies. Fifty-five buses went out on Thursday. The scabs are people who have just shown up and have no idea what’s going on, where they are supposed to drive or what kids they are supposed to pick up.

The police are very strict. They won’t even let us step off the curb and keep us penned up.

WSWS: Driving a school bus in New York City doesn’t sound like a job you can just pick up.

David: People don’t know what we go through in the buses. Sometimes we get cursed and punched by the kids, who have special needs. If we make a complaint, the Board of Ed puts it under the table. I’ve been a driver for 17 years. I started driving in East Harlem. Those kids were tough. I

had my matron, but it was still hard. We have to stop the bus sometimes to protect the kids. And you have to get to know the parents and what they need for their kids. I know parents who put four kids on four different buses.

Seven or eight years ago, one coworker of mine had returned to work after heart surgery. One afternoon, he was waiting in his bus in front of a school for his kids. A child came in and punched him on the chest. Five minutes later, he drove out and had a heart attack. He died at the hospital.

We take courses on how to handle them, four times a year, on how to talk to them when they are in the bus. But we drivers have to focus on our driving. I can’t focus on the children. Sometimes having a matron is not enough for what these kids need.

WSWS: Stress must be a real problem for drivers.

David: It is for all of us. My wife is a driver and becomes very stressed out. She picks up kids on one corner in Queens, goes to Brooklyn, goes to Rockaway and then back to a school here in Queens. She goes the through the whole city on one run.

WSWS: That’s difficult, especially in New York traffic. What happens if you’re late?

David: We have to call the base and give them a reason why we’re late. If we don’t call in, we get a violation that costs \$500. If you don’t pay the violation, you get suspended for three days. The punishments are getting worse. We have to wear a tie; if you forget, this year, that’s a \$250 fine. If we don’t have a working flashlight, that’s another \$200 violation. It has to be working. We are under a lot of pressure in addition to driving the kids.

Things have gotten worse over the years. Any time there is an accident or a mistake by a bus driver, there is a new regulation. If one driver makes a mistake, everybody pays for it. Sleeping children are now a big deal. If you drop off the kids in the morning, go back to the yard, and you find that a child is still there, that is now an immediate termination. The matron has to check for sleeping children

and then the driver has to. We have to turn around a sign on the back of the bus that says, “No Sleeping Children on Board.”

WSWS: The Department of Education seems to have been tightening the screws on you for some time.

David: Oh yes. One of our fellow drivers carries two matrons who work together to move kids in wheelchairs. She picked up a child one morning, and then went to a second stop while the matrons went inside the building to get the child. She was parked maybe a distance of a few yards from the building. When she saw the two matrons coming out of the building with a wheelchair, she stepped off the bus to open the ramp. Remember, there is still a child on the bus. But behind her bus was an inspector from the Board of Education—you know they follow us, and we don’t know when they will appear.

Half an hour later, the company called her to the office. The inspector had taken a picture. Since technically you can’t leave a child on the bus alone, she was suspended for six months for standing outside the bus helping her matrons.

Another coworker made a left turn to get into the fuel pump when the light said to go right. A Board of Ed inspector was standing right there and he got suspended for two weeks for making that left.

As we turned to discussing the strike itself, David expressed himself forcefully about the manner in which a mayor, worth \$26 billion, was able to slander the drivers without criticism.

“How long has he been in office? 12 years? And he has increased his income by billions. But then he says that we make sufficient money. I have only one word for that: selfish. He owns the media and the media is going to do what he says.”

WSWS: *The New York Times* wrote an editorial about the strike on January 23. Did you have a chance to see it?

David: Yes, I saw the editorial. One of my coworkers brought it to my attention. I said, pay the *New York Times* no mind.

WSWS: We think it’s significant that this paper makes such a vicious attack on the strikers. All of the corporate media are against the strikers in one way or another, but the *Times* is the paper of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, the paper of Obama.

David: Yes, my union endorsed Obama, too.

We discussed the union’s offer to compromise with the Bloomberg administration, an offer that Bloomberg rejected. We told him that the union had no strategy, beyond grasping to keep its dues base, Workers had to break decisively with the Democrats and the organization that supports them, and take the strike into their own hands, especially in appealing to teachers.

David: I took a group of my people to a public school. The union said they were behind us, and gave us leaflets. We gave them out to parents. In fact, we have done three schools. The teachers and the parents are supporting us. We gave them leaflets and said, “Call Bloomberg. Let him know what you think. Tell him what’s going on with your kids.”

WSWS: Do you think Bloomberg’s going to listen?

David: I don’t think so. But if he gets phone calls ... we’re trying everything we can.

WSWS: If Democrats like Bill De Blasio or Christine Quinn get elected [in the upcoming mayoral race], are things going to get better?

David: They have never mentioned a thing about our strike. I haven’t heard anything from them. Will these people help us? They are always going to mention the debt, or that New York is in a crisis and this and that. They will always mention that. The only way they’re going to get cheaper contracts is with scab drivers, and inexperienced untrained drivers. The kids are our future and they don’t care about the kids.

WSWS: What else is going on in the strike?

David: One problem is that we don’t know what’s going on. One of my fellow workers approached me and said, “We’re going down.” “No we’re not,” I told him. “Why don’t we get a group from all of the drivers? One person knows what going on is Mike Cordiello [the president of local 1181]. So he needs to say something to us.” We’ve thought about getting a group to go in front of the union. We want an answer about what’s being going on.

WSWS: You’re being kept in the dark ...

David: Exactly. We’re just standing there on the picket line, saying, I heard this, I heard that, but it’s not information about reality. We’re going to have to get an answer.



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