

# Alabama school bus driver shot and killed while defending schoolchildren

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A school bus driver in rural Alabama gave his life this past week to defend schoolchildren on his bus. When a gunman boarded the bus in Dale County, Alabama on Tuesday and demanded two children, Charles Poland Jr. refused and was shot dead.

The gunman, Jimmy Lee Dykes, described by neighbors as a paranoid survivalist, grabbed a five-year-old boy at random. As of Friday, he continued to hold the child hostage in an underground bunker on his property in Midland City, Alabama.

The hostage was identified by the first name of Ethan, a kindergartner whose sixth birthday is next week. As the standoff continued into a third day, authorities worried about how the schoolboy was keeping warm in 30 degree temperatures at night.

Poland, 66, had retired as a diesel mechanic in 2009 but continued to work as a school bus driver to help support his wife. He was born in Idaho but had moved to Alabama in the 1960s and raised his family there.

The NBC report quoted Poland's son, Aaron Poland, as explaining that when a child boarded his father's bus, "they were no longer their parents', they were his. And I know that's the reason why my dad took those shots. It was for his children, just like he would do for me and my sister."

In another report, Poland's wife Jan, to whom he had been married for 44 years, described him as quiet and honest, a man with no enemies, and so gentle that he was often reluctant to discipline his own children.

The selflessness and courage of this retired worker highlights the dedication of school bus workers around the country, who like him daily take on the immense responsibility for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of school children, under difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions.

And yet the school bus drivers and attendants in New

York City, forced out on strike on January 16 to defend their jobs, a living wage and working conditions fought for over a period of decades, have faced nonstop attacks from the capitalist politicians and the big business media. Poland's sacrifice exposes the lie that the school bus workers are abandoning the children, including mentally and physically disabled pupils who are bused to their schools under the watchful protection of both the drivers and the bus matrons.

Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* has demonized the strikers with special vitriol, calling them "vandals" and "pests," and accusing them of "pushing New York City's kids into the cold."

The *New York Times*, the voice of the Democratic Party and the "newspaper of record," has been no less vicious. The *Times* published an editorial soon after the strike began insisting that New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg not back down in the campaign to force workers to accept poverty wages or give up their jobs (See "Why the *New York Times* backs Bloomberg's assault on school bus drivers").

The Alabama tragedy illustrates the hypocrisy of the ruling class. For the purpose of selling newspapers or obscuring the important class issues facing working people, it sometimes singles out an individual worker as a hero. When workers join together to challenge exploitation and injustice, however, the same big business mouthpieces and representatives discover that they are "thugs" or worse.



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