

After NLRB rules strike legal

New York mayor steps up attack on school bus workers

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New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg is pressing ahead with his campaign to strip school transportation workers of job and wage protections after the National Labor Relations Board failed to rule their two-and-a-half week strike illegal.

Nearly 9,000 school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics walked out on January 16 after city officials put busing contracts out to bid without including a provision that requires private bus companies to hire transportation workers from a citywide seniority list and maintain their current wages and benefits. This protection, known as the Employee Protection Provision (EPP), was established in 1965 and defended in a 16-week strike in 1979.

Last month, 20 private school bus companies filed a complaint with the NLRB, claiming they were the targets of a secondary strike—illegal under federal labor law—and victims of a dispute between Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 and the Bloomberg administration. On Friday, the NLRB ruled the bus companies were a primary party in the dispute, along with the city.

The NLRB found that the private bus companies had refused to accept proposals from the union to include EPP in negotiations for a new agreement to replace the one that expired on December 31, 2012, “although they do not deny that they have the ability to do so.” In the previous contract, the NLRB noted, the EPP was an “integral part” of the agreement, and allowed the union to “strike the Charging Party Employers in the event DOE [Department of Education] promulgates any contract bid without the EPPs.”

Following the ruling, DOE spokesman Erin Hughes denounced the strikers, declaring, “This ruling doesn’t

change the fact that the union is recklessly holding our students and city hostage over issues it must settle directly with the bus companies.”

The Bloomberg administration has made it clear it is willing to sacrifice the health and safety of school children, including many special education students with physical and mental disabilities, in order to replace the experienced drivers and matrons they rely on with low-paid, inexperienced workers. The city is already using strikebreakers without the slightest regard for students.

Bloomberg, whose net worth is estimated at \$26 billion, reiterated the claim that he was only out to “save taxpayers’ money.” Speaking Thursday, he said, “The terms of the bid are clearly only price, and we’ve got to get the best price for the city.”

In fact, rising student transportation costs have little to do with allegedly high wages. Many transportation workers qualify for food stamps, with matrons, some of whom are single mothers, earning \$26,000 a year. Drivers who make around \$50,000 can hardly keep up in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

The rising costs are to a large extent bound up with the attack on public education and expansion of for-profit charter schools pushed by Bloomberg in the city and the Obama administration nationally. As the *New York Times* acknowledged, “Educational policies, driven both by the Bloomberg administration and the federal government, that afford parents greater choice in where to send their children, as well as extended school days, have also helped to drive up costs, in part because of longer distances the buses must travel, along more tailored routes.”

Meanwhile, the school bus companies have canceled

medical insurance for strikers and their families, seeking to starve them into submission.

There is widespread support for the strikers in the working class in New York City and elsewhere. Teachers, transit workers and others are facing the same gang-up of corporate executives and big business politicians who claim there is no money for the most essential social needs, while the stock market skyrockets and profits soar.

The leaders of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 and the ATU International, however, have offered workers no way forward to break their isolation and mobilize this support. On the contrary, earlier this week, the ATU, following the advice of the New York Central Labor Council and a mediator, offered to end the strike and impose a “cooling off” period if the city stopped bidding out new bus contracts and negotiated with the unions on cost-cutting concessions.

Bloomberg rejected the surrender and insisted there would be no negotiations unless his terms were met.

The union bureaucracy in New York City, including the United Federation of Teachers, fears that the school bus strike can become a catalyst for a much wider struggle of the working class against the attack on public education and the jobs and living standards of transit, hospital and other city workers. This would upset their relations with the political establishment.

Although the combined assets of ATU Local 1181 and the International are over \$121 million, the union has handed out only a paltry sum, around \$30 a day, in strike benefits, while advising workers to sign up for COBRA supplemental health care insurance, which they must pay for, and directing workers to food banks.

On the picket lines many workers were angered over the role of the union and wanted to find a way to appeal to parents and the working class as a whole to defend their struggle. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke to workers in Queens on Friday. The strikers had been out in the freezing cold starting at 5 am.

Charles told the WSWs that they had heard nothing from the union. “We haven’t seen anybody from the union. You guys are the first to talk to us about the strike. We’ve been out here in the cold and the union doesn’t tell us anything. We just get our strike pay of \$150 per week. My rent is \$1,200 per month, and that’s due today. How can I pay? And now, since the insurance from the company has been canceled, if I get

hurt or sick, it comes out of my own pocket.”

A Pioneer matron also remarked about the lack of information from the union. “This morning the NLRB ruled that the strike is legal. But the union isn’t giving us a new strategy. They aren’t saying to do something different. They just say to stay out in the cold. It’s too much to deal with. We feel like we’re just standing here. There has to be more than this.”

A senior driver said, “He acts like King Bloomberg. He bought himself another term in office even though that was illegal. We are not in this for the money; we are already poor. This is to defend the EPP that we got in 1965. He wants to take us back 50 years. The workers have to stop the whole city. The children deserve the best transportation possible.”

Maic Jacques commented, “We can’t live if our wages are cut in half. Bloomberg keeps talking about how expensive it is to transport the kids, but look at the real costs. Gas has gone up to \$4 a gallon and each new bus they buy costs \$150,000. That’s the real cost, not paying us. We get paid at most \$40,000 per year, and if you have zero dependents, nearly half of that is taxed.”

Edweena Cooper, a matron for seventeen years, explained what bus drivers and matrons have gone through. “Varsity got rid of 260 employees eight years ago. Now they are Pioneer. These companies are all the same, but they keep buying each other. It lets them destroy seniority and hire people again at lower pay. Since jobs are so scarce, people will take \$10-an-hour jobs.”



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