

“Bloomberg is the number one criminal”

Striking New York City school bus workers speak out

Our reporters
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Nearly 9,000 school bus drivers, mechanics and matron-attendants in New York City have been on strike since January 16 to defend the inclusion of the Employee Protection Provision (EPP) in the bids that the city's Department of Education makes annually for bus service from private contractors. The EPP allows drivers to keep their seniority and higher rates of pay.

New York's mayor, a multibillionaire and representative of the small, ultra-wealthy social layer that rules the city, removed the EPP from bids ostensibly to lower costs to the city. Without the EPP, bus companies will be able to pay workers far lower wages; in effect, this will create a workforce of casual and poorly trained drivers. The drivers transport over 150,000 children each day, a third of them with special needs. The mayor, is, in effect proposing to give these children the worst possible care on their way to school, and to impoverish a significant section of municipal workers.

Workers have gone through significant experiences in the 20 days of the strike. They have seen a representative of the ruling class, the billionaire mayor, arrogantly refuse to negotiate on any of his demands. The drivers have seen their union refuse to conduct any struggle to defend job security and basic rights.

Last week, Local 1181, at the behest of the New York City Central Labor Council, offered to impose a “cooling off period” and order the workers back, if Bloomberg suspended the bids. Bloomberg rejected the offer, but the union has continued with its bankrupt strategy of appealing to the supposed moral sensibilities of the mayor and seeking the support of Democrats on the City Council. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke over the weekend to school bus drivers at picket

lines across the city, as well as at a demonstration called by Local 1181 at Madison Square Park in Manhattan. Workers spoke of their outrage at Bloomberg, anger at the conduct of the ATU, and the need to appeal to the whole working class.

Griselda Trinidad spoke about the attacks on bus drivers that Bloomberg is planning. “I have been working this job for 18 years making \$16 an hour. If they get rid of the EPP, my wages will be cut from \$612 a week to \$190. I have two kids in college and I have a baby who is deaf. I just can't afford to live off of \$7.50 an hour, but that's what they want us to do.”

She also commented on the real culprits attacking the children. “Bloomberg is the number one criminal. We are experienced drivers and we know what we are doing. The kids respect us. We have been trained for this. Bloomberg doesn't care. He would just hire people off the street who don't know what they are doing. We will strike until June if we have to.”

Daniel Baptiste, a driver with five years, raised a question. “I have a question for Bloomberg. Three years ago it was illegal for you or anyone to run for a third term for mayor. How did you run and get another term? How do you say what you did is legal, and what we are doing to defend our jobs now is illegal?”

“At the end of June school ends. When we come back in September, if there is no EPP, we will have no run to pick, and we won't have a job. What is in this for us? By September we all will all be out of a job. They are hiring replacement drivers right now. They are hiring more every day. By the end of the month we will all be replaced.

“The union says nothing about this. There are two unions scabbing on us as well. They are Teamsters 854

and Laborers 91. They are all working now. The union tells us if we try to stop them going out on their scab runs, the police who are here will book us.

Philomena Trapani, a matron for 15 years at the Staten Island division of the Atlantic Express company, spoke to the WSWS about the buses being driven by members of other unions. “Sixty-eight scab buses went out from here yesterday morning. These are the drivers we work with, but they are in a different union. The union is United Service Workers Local 55.

“They are being harassed and threatened for striking with us by their boss Dominic Gatto. It was on the news yesterday. The drivers were told that they had to come to work yesterday or they would lose their jobs. One driver, Anthony Di Sano was fired because he refused to cross our picket line.”

Two other drivers, Juan Santiago and Robert Amadeo, with a combined 42 years of experience as bus drivers between them, were angry that their expertise and training counted for nothing. Before driving city school buses they had worked together for the MTA driving the city’s longer-distance express buses. Later they had changed from New York Bus Service Company to a second school bus company, Grandpa’s, because they had to “follow the work,” something they were able to do because the Employment Protection Provisions (EPP) allowed them to maintain their pay grade and seniority.

“We are professional drivers,” Robert said. “We have done everything they have asked, taken the trainings, passed the exams, been certified. And now after all this, they want to replace us with drivers they have trained in a week! They say they care about the kids’ safety, but this is going to put the kids in jeopardy.”

Asked what they thought the motivation behind this was, both were clear that the company bosses and the city wanted to drop their pay and cut their benefits. Juan said, “If they can get rid of the top paid drivers, they can get two drivers for the price of one. Meanwhile we and our families are going to be out on public assistance.”

They felt that the bus companies and the mayor were trying to bust the union, and force the drivers and matrons to work without a contract, the same way that MTA workers have been for the past year. However, they were angry that Local 1181 hadn’t been supporting them as they stood out on the picket lines.

“There has been a total lack of communication. The union leaders don’t appear out here on the picket line. We haven’t had any meetings with the big bosses. Everything we know, we have to learn from TV,” Robert said. “We deserve to know what is going on. The union claims they are negotiating behind closed doors, but the only thing we get out here are rumors. Basically we feel we are lost, thrown to the wolves.”



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