

The way forward for the New York City school bus strikers

Socialist Equality Party
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For nearly three weeks, 8,800 school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics have waged a courageous battle against New York City's billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg. Acting on behalf of the financial interests that run the city, the mayor is seeking to strip school transportation workers of job and wage protections in place for nearly half a century.

On the picket lines, strikers who have spoken to the *World Socialist Web Site* have expressed frustration over the direction of the strike. Some have talked about marching to the headquarters of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) to protest being kept in the dark by the union while strikers man picket lines in the cold and receive a miserly \$30 a day in strike pay.

One striker in Astoria, Queens told the WSWs: "The mayor is not budging. Parents have complained to City Hall that the students are suffering without the school busses and his attitude is 'Get over it.' But all the union is doing is begging."

There is sense among strikers that there is enormous sympathy for their struggle among working people throughout the city. Workers have discussed organizing protests independently of the union and some have taken the initiative to speak to teachers and parents at local schools.

If the isolation of the strike is to be overcome, however, such initiatives must take a conscious organizational and political form.

It is necessary first of all to have a clear understanding of the social interests and aims that underlie the attack on the school bus workers. The Bloomberg administration is determined to defeat the school bus drivers as part of its drive against the working class as a whole. As in other cities, this offensive includes the dismantling of public education. Since coming to office in 2002, Bloomberg has shut

140 so-called "failing" schools and opened hundreds of for-profit charters.

The mayor, a direct representative of Wall Street, sees the school bus drivers as low-hanging fruit that can be picked off first before taking on teachers, firefighters, transit workers and other city workers. In New York and across the country, Democratic, Republican and independent officials declare the jobs, living standards and pensions of public-sector workers to be "unaffordable," even as the stock market soars and corporate profits go through the roof.

Similar and in some cases even more brutal austerity measures are being carried out against workers in Europe, the Middle East and virtually every other part of the world. Nearly five years after the Wall Street crash of 2008, what is unfolding is the failure of the world capitalist system. The corporate-financial elites are determined to make the working class pay for the breakdown of their system.

In the face of this attack, the strategy of the ATU and the New York City Central Labor Council has proven a complete failure. Concerned above all with preserving their relations with the city's corporate and political establishment, the unions have done nothing to mobilize the hundreds of thousands of city workers as well as parents and students to defend the striking bus drivers, mechanics and matrons.

Instead, the unions have limited themselves to "moral" appeals for the mayor to be more reasonable. This culminated in the offer by the ATU last week to call off the strike and institute a two- to three-month "cooling off period." During this time the unions would discuss major concessions to help the city reduce costs while negotiations continued on Bloomberg's demand that the Employee Protection Provisions (EPP), which protect bus workers' jobs, wages and benefits, be

shredded.

The mayor has thus far rejected the unions' offer of surrender, insisting that the bus companies be allowed to get rid of experienced workers and replace them with new workers at even lower wages. Refusing to negotiate, the mayor is instead dispatching thousands of police to the picket lines and overseeing a strike-breaking operation.

The mayor does not stand alone. The entire political establishment agrees with the attack on the jobs and living conditions of the working class. The Democrats—from President Obama and Governor Andrew Cuomo to City Council Speaker Christine Quinn and other prospective mayoral challengers such as Bill de Blasio and John Liu—are no less the political front men of Wall Street than the Republicans and so-called “independents” like Bloomberg.

Asked about the Central Labor Council's offer to suspend the strike, Joe Jamison, director of the transportation department of the New York State AFL-CIO, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “When you're in negotiations and the other party is locked into a position, then you have to make it as easy as possible for them to shift to your position.”

What a novel strategy! When you're in a battle with an intransigent enemy, the best course of action is to bow your head so he can cut it off! This would be laughable if it weren't for the devastating consequences of such a policy for strikers and their families. It is their necks, not those of the union bureaucrats, that are on the chopping block.

In a recent WNYC radio interview, ATU Local 1181 President Michael Cordiello complained that the mayor was tearing up 50 years of “labor peace” and “stability” by eliminating the EPP clause. This is true. But it only proves that the mayor, and the American ruling class as a whole, is engaged in a war without compromise against the working class.

To carry forward a struggle, workers need organization. The Socialist Equality Party is calling for the formation of rank-and-file committees, made up of bus workers as well as parents, teachers and other workers, to defend the strikers and oppose the assault on public education.

In order to mobilize workers in support of the strike, these committees must be completely independent of the ATU and the other official unions and reject their

strategy of subordinating the strike to maneuvers with the Bloomberg administration, the city's Democratic politicians and the private bus companies.

The committees should establish direct lines of communication and organize common actions with teachers, students and parents engaged in the fight against school closings and budget cuts.

The task of such committees will be to develop a strategy to oppose *all cuts*. The claim that there is no money for education—and for the teachers and school transportation workers—is a lie. Just a fraction of Bloomberg's estimated personal fortune of \$26 billion would be more than enough to guarantee a decent living standard for school workers for years.

This is fundamentally a *political* struggle because the underlying issue is the need to break the financial dictatorship of the banks and big business over society. School bus workers and workers across the US and throughout the world are coming face to face with the fact that their rights and interests are incompatible with the capitalist profit system, which is based on private ownership of the means of production and the exploitation of the working class.

The working class must organize itself as an independent political force. Securing the social right of all workers to a secure job and a decent standard of living is bound up with the fight for workers' power and the reorganization of economic life to meet the needs of society as a whole. This means the nationalization of the banks and major corporations under the democratic control of working people as part of a planned socialist economy.

We call on all strikers who see the need to begin this fight to contact the Socialist Equality Party.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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