

New York City school bus drivers should reject union moves to end strike

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The strike by nearly 9,000 New York City school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics, about to begin its fourth week, has won widespread sympathy among working people, who are glad to see a section of workers finally standing up to the city's billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg.

But the strike is in grave danger, and with it, the jobs, wages and pensions of the workers. The response of the Amalgamated Transit Union, the New York Central Labor Council and the AFL-CIO to last week's ruling by the National Labor Relations Board upholding the legality of the strike is to redouble their efforts to call it off.

Their only condition is that Mayor Bloomberg gives them the fig leaf of a "cooling-off period" and negotiations to conceal what would be an abject capitulation and betrayal of the workers. The strikers would return to work having obtained no commitment of any kind from the city or the bus companies to maintain the Employee Protection Provisions (EPP) that ensures job security.

The union would use the cooling-off period to seek to trade major concessions in workers' wages, jobs and benefits for guarantees for the incomes and privileges of the union bureaucrats. The Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) is out to preserve its own institutional interests, including its ability to continue to collect dues from the next batch of school bus drivers, even if they are working for poverty wages without the slightest job security.

The desperation of the union leadership to call off the struggle is out in the open. Had the NLRB ruled the strike illegal, they would have insisted the strike be ended. Now that the NLRB has ruled the strike legal—they take the same position!

The shutdown of the strike would be a disastrous

defeat for all city workers. It would only encourage Bloomberg and the financial powers he speaks for to accelerate their attacks on city workers. The main concern of the ATU and other city unions is to keep the school bus strike from developing into a broader movement of the working class that would upset their relations with the city's political and corporate establishment.

"The mayor has the power to put our drivers and matrons back to work as early as Monday [February 4]," ATU Local 1181 President Michael Cordiello wrote. "All we ask is that he suspend the bids, and is willing to discuss ways to reduce costs within the school bus transportation industry."

"Reduce costs" is coded language for imposing give-backs on the workers. The strikers sense the need not to surrender, but to broaden the struggle to other sections of workers, parents and students. But to do so, they must establish new organizations of struggle, independent of the unions. The Socialist Equality Party proposes the formation of rank-and-file committees to mobilize the active support of the working class in the city, the state and nationally.

The ATU called an electronic "town hall meeting" Monday night to try to mollify the anger and frustration of rank-and-file workers on the picket lines. Fearful of an eruption if they called a mass membership meeting—from workers who are being starved on \$30-a-day strike benefits—the ATU held the one-hour event by cell phone and pre-screened questions from the workers.

ATU International President Larry Hanley, whose salary is \$285,000, and ATU Local 1181 President Michael Cordiello, who takes in \$245,000 a year, sounded like business consultants discussing opportunities to be opened up through backroom

discussions with Democratic Party politicians. There wasn't the slightest hint that workers were locked in a life-and-death battle.

Cordiello acknowledged that even after the mayor sent out bids without the EPP, the union had sought "not to have a strike." He said the strikers enjoyed overwhelming support from parents, and that teachers, firefighters and city workers wanted to come to the defense of the school bus drivers and oppose Bloomberg.

So what did he propose? To repeat the union's offer to end the strike without having won anything for the workers.

In pursuit of this surrender, International ATU President Hanley said the union was "working the press and the political establishment." He had the gall to boast that AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka had offered the miserable sum of \$25,000 for a food bank for strikers.

The ATU and other unions will hold a march across the Brooklyn Bridge and a rally in Manhattan this Sunday. Asked on a Queens' picket line earlier in the day why the protest was being held on a Sunday—instead of workday when strikers could appeal directly to the working class of the city—another ATU official insisted that such a protest would only alienate the public.

This only underscores the fact that school bus workers can prevail in their struggle only if they break the stranglehold of the unions and fight for the full industrial and political mobilization of the working class in opposition to the political establishment, the two big business parties, and the Wall Street oligarchs they represent.



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