

Bloomberg presses attack on striking New York City school bus drivers

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7 February 2013

The strike by nearly 9,000 New York City school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics entered its fourth week today with the Bloomberg administration preparing to accept bids from private school bus contractors that will no longer include job and wage protections in place for half a century.

The workers, who provide transportation services for 150,000 students, including many physically and mentally impaired children, walked out on January 16 after Bloomberg sent out the bids without the Employee Protection Provisions. The EPP allows workers to follow their jobs and retain their wages and benefits if the city contracts with another company.

The bids, which were sent out by the Department of Education last month, are due back next Monday and Tuesday. Bloomberg and school officials have pledged to offer contracts to the “lowest responsible bidder.” If this happens, higher paid senior workers will be thrown out of their jobs and the city could attempt to resume student transportation with low-paid, inexperienced drivers.

In the face of this threat, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 has continued to bow before Bloomberg and reiterate its offer to shut down the strike if the mayor agrees to enter into negotiations and work with the ATU to cut student transportation costs. The ATU has joined with city Democrats to urge the mayor to accept a “cooling off” period, which would end the strike without a contract or any shift on the part of the mayor.

Last week, Bloomberg rejected the union’s capitulatory offer and has refused to negotiate, claiming only the bus companies can decide wage and benefit issues.

It is clear that the mayor is seeking to restructure the school transportation system and convert school bus employees into little more than casual labor, reduced to near-starvation wages in one of the most expensive cities in the world. If the city is successful in defeating the

strike, it will use its victory over the school bus workers as a precedent to strip teachers and transit, sanitation, hospital and other city workers of wage and pension protections.

One of the bus companies that has reportedly sent in a bid is First Student, owned by the multinational transit conglomerate First Group, which also owns Greyhound Bus Company. The largest school transportation provider in the US, First Group has a notorious record of attacking workers.

First Student has long avoided bidding for work in New York City because of the wage and benefit protections that workers defended in a bitter three-month strike in 1979.

However, it is one of the largest providers in the New York City suburbs of Long Island, where school bus drivers are guaranteed only a six-hour work day, with little or no benefits. These miserable part-time conditions are overseen by ATU Local 1181. As one senior driver told the WSWS, “They only get six hours—or about \$90 a day—and have no benefits or company-paid pensions. But they still have to pay dues to Local 1181.”

This puts into focus the ATU’s offer to help Bloomberg cut costs in New York City. The ATU called the strike not to defend the drivers, but to apply pressure to insure that it be included in Bloomberg’s restructuring plans and continue to collect dues, no matter how bad the wages and conditions of the workers it “represents.”

The ATU has accepted contract after contract, rolling back the conditions of school bus drivers, including lowering starting wages for new-hires, undermining overtime protections and allowing separate contracts for each bus company. In its conduct of the strike, the central concern of the ATU bureaucrats has been to prevent strikers from mounting a struggle that would disrupt their relations with the city’s big business politicians and corporations.

Workers have been left to picket in front of bus garages in isolated parts of the city. Requests to organize a march across the Brooklyn Bridge and into Manhattan on a weekday in order to have the maximum impact—as in the 1979 strike—have been rejected, and instead a protest is being scheduled for a Sunday. Workers, who are barely surviving on strike pay of \$30 a day, with no health insurance, have been kept in the dark with no information about behind-the-scenes deal-making, while the only “meeting” for the local’s 9,000 members was a one-hour teleconference call, in which all of the questions were pre-screened.

Beginning on Tuesday, ATU shop stewards and other officials began a campaign to prevent workers from talking to reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*, which has provided the only means for strikers to explain their struggle and break the isolation imposed them by the ATU. On Wednesday, an ATU steward at the Flushing, Queens depot called New York City cops and Atlantic Express management to demand that WSWS reporters leave.

While focusing their fire on the WSWS, the ATU has done nothing about the continued strikebreaking by Bloomberg, which involves drivers and mechanics from other unions and ATU locals.

Breaking the isolation of the strike will require school bus workers to organize independently of the ATU and take the conduct of the strike in their own hands. The Socialist Equality Party is calling for the formation of a rank-and-file committee to issue a call to the working class of New York City to back the strike and expand it into a political struggle to defend the basic social rights of workers against the banks and the two big business parties.

Many workers on the picket lines defied the bullying by ATU officials and continued to discuss the critical political issues in the strike with WSWS reporters.

A driver at the Atlantic Express depot in Flushing with 13 years of service said, “We don’t know anything. We’re not getting any feedback from the union. We’re just going on speculation and don’t know the meaning of what is going on.

“Mayor Bloomberg is a schmuck; he’s an oppressor of the working class. They want to get rid of us and hire less. It’s very painful for us. This is all about economic issues. We are here fighting together, standing in the cold, to defend our job security.

“If we give up and go back to work, we’ll be handing Bloomberg a victory. We need to keep this fight going

and get the firefighters and teachers involved because they are going to be next. Right now they are picking on us because they think we are weak and they have laws against other workers striking.

“Back in 1979, during the last school bus strike, the unions were still unions and they fought for us. If we go down, the conditions for the top union leaders aren’t going to change. They are still going to get the same pay, convention trips, cars and bonuses.

“Bloomberg is pushing charter schools and testing to evaluate teachers. He’s says there is no money and has to cut us to save. But school transportation is only \$1.1 billion out of a total school budget of \$24 billion.

“All the politicians, including Obama, are for the rich. The news media is controlled by the big corporations too and they aren’t saying anything about us.”

A Haitian worker commented to the WSWS, “I’m glad to see you out here. None of us really knows what’s going on. I think its good that you are raising the idea of socialism.” He then said, “Not many people know that it really means fighting for humanity.”

He also had a brief exchange with a WSWS reporter about the politics of Aristide. “I thought that he was for the people. But after he came into power, he became a tool of capitalism. Kind of like the unions here. They don’t fight for the workers either.”

Paula, a worker with five years at Atlantic Express, told the WSWS, “We hope we get what we are looking for, but he [Bloomberg] doesn’t care. He has a lot of money but he does not own New York City. Something’s going to happen. They are taking away our medical insurance, taking everything from us, but something’s going to happen”.

Jose also spoke on this issue. “I’ve been in this company for 12 years. I am starting to feel the pain of having no paycheck. It’s not fair. Guys who have been working here for 25 or 30 years are going to lose everything in a minute. Like health insurance. Health insurance is important for us. We can’t afford to go to a doctor without insurance. Right now, I’m just following the union, but it doesn’t look like they will do anything.”



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