

School bus workers fight for job security and wages: 1979 and today

Fred Mazelis
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The current strike of New York City school bus drivers and matrons is not the first time they have had to fight to defend their job security, wages and benefits. In 1979 these workers conducted a 13-week strike against the city and the bus companies.

An examination of the events of 1979 only underscores the transformed role of the unions and their unwillingness and inability today to wage a similar fight against the assault being carried out by the Bloomberg administration and the rest of the political establishment.

In mid-February of 1979, almost 33 years ago, the school bus drivers began a strike in opposition to the city's plans under then-mayor Ed Koch to use competitive bidding to destroy the guarantees the drivers had to keep their jobs, wages and conditions even if new contractors won the contract to provide bus service.

Amalgamated Transit Union locals 1181 and 1061, representing the striking drivers and matrons, reported that the workers refused the union's requests that they return to their jobs. The Koch administration, demanding that the workers pay for the city's fiscal crisis, obtained an injunction in State Supreme Court in Brooklyn.

The workers, however, defied the injunction, even after it was served on individual school bus drivers and matrons. When the union requested they return to work, the attitude of the workers as reported by the Local 1181 president was "You talk, we'll walk," a phrase that summed up their militant struggle. In the media, the walkout was referred to as a "wildcat" strike.

At the same time, some of the workers took action to stop buses and taxis from scabbing on the strike. Mayor Koch, the reactionary politician who died just a week ago and was eulogized by every Democratic politician

for many miles around, called the strikers "goons" and "bastards."

At a news conference, Koch falsely accused the workers, exactly as Bloomberg is doing today, of abandoning the schoolchildren and using them as pawns. Of course it was the city that was holding the students hostage, not the drivers.

Koch swore he would never negotiate with the strikers unless they first went back to their jobs. By early March, however, the city's position appeared to weaken. The mayor suggested that Bruce McIver, the director of the city's Office of Municipal Relations, might mediate the dispute.

The strikers continued their fight for job security for another two months. Thousands walked across the Brooklyn Bridge in the middle of the week for maximum impact and maximum appeal to other sections of the working class. Mass picketing stopped scabs and strikers even blocked traffic by abandoning a streetful of cars in front of school buildings.

A settlement was reached in the second week of May. Milton Mollen, then the chief justice of the Appellate Division of the New York State Supreme Court, served as mediator in working out the final agreement.

The workers got a measure of job security in the Employee Protection Provision (EPP), which codified some of the procedures under which veteran employees had been guaranteed their positions and wage levels in cases where a new bus company became their employer.

The 1979 strike took place just one year after the coal miners had defied Jimmy Carter and a Taft-Hartley injunction. A year later New York City's transit workers also defied antistrike legislation, the Taylor Law.

In 1979 the school bus workers defied the courts. In

2013, even after the federal National Labor Relations Board declares the strike to be legal, the ATU has offered to return to work. It was the same Milton Mollen, long since retired and now 93 years old, who met with the union and the companies soon after the current strike began. He brought an offer of virtual surrender from ATU Local 1181 to the Bloomberg administration—a proposal to return to work while negotiating “cost savings”—only to be flatly turned down.

Today, in contrast to the 1979 strike, the workers have been kept isolated, picketing in desolate areas of the city, out of touch with one another. There has been no public meeting for the rank and file.

In 1979 there was no scabbing. Other unions did not cross the picket lines, while today the United Service Workers and ATU Local 91 are sending workers across picket lines at Atlantic, Consolidated and some of the other school bus companies. Even mechanics from Local 1181, the same local as the striking drivers, are crossing, told that they must because they have separate contracts and will be fired if they don’t continue to work.

In 1979, the union, its well-known corruption notwithstanding, was still a defensive organization, answerable to the rank and file to a certain extent. Today, the leadership negotiates for its own interests, in opposition to the needs of the rank and file, seeking a cut of the profits sweated out of the workers.

The 1979 struggle is just one example of the basic truth that nothing was ever achieved except through independent struggle. Carrying out such a struggle today requires building new organizations, rank-and-file committees of struggle independent of the ATU and the other unions and based on an entirely new perspective for the unconditional defense of the jobs, living standards and working conditions of all workers.



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