

Mobilize the working class to defend New York school bus strike

The Socialist Equality Party
9 February 2013

For over three weeks, 9,000 New York City school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics have been engaged in a courageous battle. Their struggle has now reached a turning point, with private school bus companies returning bids that are expected to eliminate job and wage protections in place for nearly half a century.

In their struggle, the striking bus workers represent the entire working class. Teachers, firefighters, transit, sanitation, hospital and other city workers know they have a major stake in the outcome of the current conflict. Mayor Michael Bloomberg speaks and acts on behalf of a corporate and financial elite determined to make the working population pay for the crisis of the capitalist system.

Among strikers there is a growing awareness that the struggle must become the starting point for a far broader mobilization of the working class. Despite the slanders by the media and its news blackout, strikers enjoy support from parents and other working people who are glad to see someone finally standing up to the Bloomborgs of this world.

But the struggle is in serious danger. The February 10 demonstration has not been called to organize a more powerful mobilization against strikebreaking and scabbing, but to let off steam and line up workers behind the big business Democratic Party politicians with whom the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) is aligned.

The union hopes and plans to shut down the strike and send workers back without a contract or the slightest concession from Bloomberg. Workers must reject this effort!

Accepting a “cooling off” period would be a devastating defeat for the strike and only encourage the mayor to escalate the attack on all workers. The union has repeatedly made clear it wants to help Bloomberg

“cut costs,” code words for imposing sharp wage and benefit concessions. Workers have been left entirely in the dark as to what “costs” the union is prepared to cut.

The ATU has aims that are distinct from and opposed to the interests of the workers—above all, to get Bloomberg to preserve the union’s “seat at the table.” Union officials are concerned that the opening up of contract bids to low-cost, transnational bus giants like First Student would disrupt their entrenched relations with the current bus companies.

However, the ATU already collects dues from members working part-time and with no benefits for First Student on Long Island, and it is prepared to do the same thing in New York City. The union simply wants to assure itself of a piece of the action in restructuring school bus transportation and is using the workers as pawns to that end.

ATU officials fear, above all, that the strike will break out of their grip and develop into a wider struggle against the political and economic system.

The assault on the jobs and rights of New York City bus workers is part and parcel of a nationwide, corporate-driven attack on public education and social services, which has seen the closing of schools, massive teacher layoffs and increasing privatization. Sweeping budget cuts threaten mass transit, health care and core social programs such as Social Security and Medicare.

While the billionaire Bloomberg promotes this anti-working class agenda with all the arrogance of someone who believes he owns the city, these same policies are pursued by Democrats and Republicans at all levels of government, from Barack Obama on down.

Governor Andrew Cuomo, at Bloomberg’s request, vetoed state legislation in 2011 that mandated the maintenance of the Employee Protection Provision

(EPP) in school busing contracts, thereby setting the stage for the current campaign against bus workers.

None of the potential candidates for mayor promoted by the ATU as “friends of labor”—Christine Quinn, Bill de Blasio and John Liu—has ever spoken out in direct defense of the right of the bus workers to keep the EPP and maintain their jobs, wages and seniority. If the strike broke out of the control of the ATU, those politicians would respond no differently than Democratic Mayor Ed Koch during the 1979 strike, who denounced strikers as “goons” and “bastards” and dispatched correctional vehicles from Rikers Island to scab on the strike. There is a force, however, that can defeat the attacks on the school bus workers. It is to the teachers, transit workers and other sections of workers, students and youth that the strikers must now turn.

The organization of the strike must be taken out of the hands of the ATU leadership through the establishment of an independent strike committee, democratically controlled by the rank and file. The task of this committee would be first and foremost to turn out to and mobilize the sympathy and support that exists for the strike among millions of working people in the city, across the country and internationally.

Throughout the globe, the banks and financial institutions are making the working class pay for the crisis of the capitalist system. In every country, social programs are being decimated, wages slashed, retirement ages increased and pensions destroyed, while public assets are diverted into the pockets of the super-wealthy.

In every country, the politicians’ refrain is the same: there is no money, even as the stock market and corporate profits—along with the incomes of the rich—soar.

The New York City school bus strike—which involves workers of many nationalities and ethnic backgrounds—shows the potential for uniting all working people in a common struggle to defend social rights. To do this, the working class needs to be organized *as a political force*, independently of the big business parties and the trade unions that defend them.

Breaking the economic and political dictatorship of the banks and big business is possible only if workers take political power into their own hands, nationalize the banks and major corporations under the democratic control of working people, and reorganize economic

life to serve social interests, not the wealthy few.

We encourage all workers who see the need to take up this fight to contact the SEP.



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