

New York City bus strike in danger

City takes bids stripping school bus drivers of job protections

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The New York City Department of Education on Tuesday began the review process on bids submitted by dozens of private school bus companies, vying for new five-year contracts to transport some 150,000 students.

With this review, Mayor Michael Bloomberg made good on his pledge to accept bids without the job, wage and pension protections that school bus employees have had in place for nearly half a century.

On January 16, nearly 9,000 school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics went on strike after Bloomberg sent out the initial bids, claiming Employee Protection Provisions (EPP) were illegal because they undermined the city's obligation to contract services to the lowest bidder.

The provisions, which school bus drivers defended in a bitter three-month strike in 1979, required bus contractors to hire from a citywide seniority list of available workers, enabling them to keep their jobs and current wages and benefits even if the city awarded contracts to another bus company.

Hundreds of workers protested around the Department of Education facility in Long Island City, Queens where the bidding was taking place. Many sat in the hall as the list of 67 bids was read, understanding full well that each bidder intended to hire new workers off the street at poverty wages—condemning the current workforce, with decades of service, to the unemployment lines.

One bidder summed up the ruthless character of the process, telling the WSWS, “Because of the Local 1181 agreement, contractors had to hire from an existing labor pool. If I were to win the bid now, I could hire different labor at cheaper prices.”

At the same time, the companies with current

contracts will shut operations or get swallowed up by more powerful companies. Interestingly, First Student—the world's largest student transportation company—submitted a “no bid” filing with the Department of Education.

It is unlikely that the company is simply abstaining from billions in potential profits it could gain from dominating the New York City market. It is more likely that the giant company—with a notorious anti-worker record—plans to wait for the dust of the strike to settle and then buy up one or more of the smaller bus companies that win a contract. A 2005 SEC filing by Atlantic Express, the largest school bus contractor in New York City, noted, “acquisitions should be a less capital intensive form of growth than bidding for new routes.”

The strike by school bus workers is at a critical turning point. From the outset, the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 based its entire strategy on convincing Bloomberg to withhold the bids. The ATU told workers to place their faith in Democrats on the City Council to exert moral pressure on the billionaire mayor to “come to his senses.”

This has proven to be a complete failure. New bus companies will begin operating 1,150 routes, and thousands of striking workers will be out of a job by the end of this school year on June 30. The city may even begin using the new companies to supplement the strikebreaking effort against embattled school bus drivers.

The ATU has no plan B except complete capitulation and collaboration with Mayor Bloomberg and the private bus companies to destroy the wages and conditions of drivers and matrons and sign contracts as

it has done with First Student in the New York suburbs of Long Island, reducing school bus workers to casual part-time workers earning starvation wages.

The process of destroying the jobs and living standards of school bus drivers will proceed unfettered if the school bus strike continues to be isolated by the ATU, the New York City Central Labor Council and other unions. Rank-and-file strikers have to break out of the straitjacket imposed on them by the unions and fight for the full mobilization of the working class throughout the city.

The defeat of the school bus strike would be a signal to attack firefighters, teachers, transit, hospital and other city workers. This was stated plainly in a comment in the right-wing *New York Post* Tuesday, entitled, “Bus Strike: Mayor Mike wins.” In it, Michael Benjamin wrote, “If the city’s lucky, the mayor in his final months in office will use similar gambits to tackle some of the much larger union-benefit issues that are consuming ever-larger chunks of the municipal budget.”

Millions of workers throughout the city support the strike and are glad to see a section of workers stand up to the mayor and the unrelenting attack on jobs, wages and social services. As one sanitation worker in Astoria, Queens told the WSWs, “We all have a stake in their fight. Bloomberg is a stinking jerk. He tried to bring in private companies after the snowstorm.

“The unions are not even close to what they used to be. You can’t count on them. They call protests now and then but it’s only to give the outward appearance that they’re fighting. We all should support the school bus strike because we’ll be next.”

The mobilization of the working class requires a rebellion against the existing unions, which are thoroughly integrated into the corporate and political establishment and hostile to any struggle that threatens to disrupt its corrupt relations with the ruling elites. A rank-and-file strike committee is needed to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the ATU and fight for the broadest mobilization of workers to defend the strike.

The WSWs spoke with striking bus drivers picketing outside the bidding process.

Vincent, a veteran driver said, “People used to send their kids to the US to get the best education. But now they are privatizing the schools. The attack on school

bus drivers is part of this.

“The union said we are striking to stop Bloomberg from issuing these bids. Bill de Blasio and the City Council said they would stop him. No other mayor has ever touched the job protections but now he has. People are getting more and more frustrated. There’s violence erupting with school shootings and what’s happening with the Los Angeles cops. People can’t take it and there is going to be something like a civil war.”

Gabriel, another driver, said, “We need another political party in this country. They want us to keep thinking this is a democratic country when the government is for the rich. Something is going to happen. The Democrats and Republicans don’t speak for us.

“I don’t mind working every day but they’re taking our jobs and making us work for nothing. It’s freedom just for the rich, not the poor man. Look at the news media, it’s owned by Bloomberg and other corporations, that’s why they won’t ever interview workers telling what this strike is really about.”

Another striking driver said, “The working class people are the ones who make everything. If we don’t make it there is no bacon on the table. People are working harder than ever, but we are getting poorer while they’re making millions. One day the working class is going to have to say stop this nonsense.”



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