

After the bids: New York School bus strike at the crossroads

Bill Van Auken
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The month-long strike by New York City school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics has clearly reached a critical and dangerous turning point following the Department of Education's opening of bids Tuesday for 1,100 school bus routes.

From the outset the union has told workers that the strike was to put pressure on the city's billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, not to go forward with these bids, which scrap the Employment Protection Provisions (EPP) that have protected bus workers' jobs and seniority rights for over half a century. ATU Local 1181 officials talked about bringing Bloomberg to his senses, pleading with him to accept a cooling off period, postponing the bids while negotiating cost-saving concessions.

From day one, Bloomberg rejected any negotiations, and now he has gone through with the bids. Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott has stated that contracts will be signed with the vendors beginning in March.

On the picket lines, strikers demanded to know "What's Plan B?," recognizing that the strategy of protesting to Bloomberg and appealing to the Democratic politicians has manifestly failed.

No union officials were at the picket line Wednesday, and the only word from Local 1181 was a three-sentence "update" posted on its web site promising, "We will be updating you in the very near future on the direction we will be taking."

Not a few workers questioned the sense of continuing a strike called to stop the bids after the bids have already been accepted. Some raised the severe hardships imposed by a starvation strike pay of \$150 a week and the cutoff of their health benefits.

"If we knew what we were fighting for, we could put our all into it," one worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "The union can't just leave us out here," said

another. "We don't have anything to fight for now."

Privately, some workers stated that they think they should go back to work and save what they can of their jobs, paychecks and benefits. Such sentiments are entirely understandable. Those who express them are not "scabs."

The real scabs are the unions themselves, which have kept the 9,000 bus workers isolated on picket lines at bus yards scattered in industrial areas throughout the city, penned behind barricades as scab buses have rolled past. The major city unions—the United Federation of Teachers, Transport Workers Union Local 100, AFSCME—all of which have extended contracts while negotiating with the Bloomberg administration, have refused to lift a finger in defense of the school bus strikers.

As for Local 1181, it did everything in its power to block moves by rank-and-file workers to take their case to parents, teachers and other workers. As one worker put it: "Everything that was good for us—everything that would help our plight—the union stopped us from doing. They cut our legs out from under us."

Given this track record, there is no wonder that many of these workers now see the strike at a dead end.

However, a return to work under the present conditions would leave the whip in the hands of the Bloomberg administration and the bus companies, some of which are already going to court seeking to have the EPP not just removed from new contracts, but taken out of the old ones as well.

Returning to work without a contract, bus workers would face the demand from their employers for sweeping concessions to remain "competitive" with the new bidders and the threat that they would go bankrupt if they don't get them.

Bloomberg's attack has set the stage for a race to the

bottom in terms of wages, benefits and seniority rights. The ultimate aim is to create a part-time workforce paid poverty wages.

There is no way forward outside of breaking the isolation of the strike and turning toward the rest of the working class, mobilizing the immense support that school bus workers know that they have from parents, teachers, transit workers, municipal workers and others in a united struggle. If Bloomberg succeeds in smashing the school bus strikers, they will be next.

Just as the city claims that it cannot afford safe transportation for school children, so it will insist that there is no money for public education, that hospitals and fire stations must be closed and that workers' wages and conditions must be driven back.

The unions are opposed to such a struggle. It can only be carried out by the workers themselves. They must organize independently of the union to break the isolation of the strike. This means taking the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the ATU leadership through the establishment of an independent strike committee.

To succeed, such a movement must have a clear political orientation. The unions have attempted to exploit the workers' justifiable hatred of Bloomberg—a man who personifies the Wall Street financial elite and behaves as if the city were his private estate—to subordinate their life-and-death struggle to the labor bureaucracy's own alliance with the Democratic Party.

They have held out the cold comfort that Bloomberg will be gone by next January and a new Democratic mayor will likely take his place.

The suggestion that a Democratic mayor would reverse the changes pushed through by Bloomberg flies in the face of reality. Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo vetoed, at Bloomberg's behest, legislation mandating the preservation of the EPP. Former Democratic Mayor Ed Koch was the first to seek to rip up the bus workers' job and seniority rights in 1979, when he brought out Correction Department buses in a failed attempt to break their 13-week strike. Democratic officials signed off on the pre-school contracts that excluded the EPP in 2011.

The Democrats, no less than Bloomberg, represent the interests of the banks, the corporations and the wealthy, who bankroll their campaigns and control their party. The drive for cost-cutting comes from the

Democrats in Washington on down, with Obama's reactionary education "reform" agenda responsible for more school closings and teacher layoffs than under Bush.

The fight facing school bus workers, as with every other section of the working class, is fundamentally a political struggle against the entire economic and political system, capitalism. The issue is to break the stranglehold exercised by the banks and big business over the resources needed to resolve the social needs of working people, the vast majority of the population.

Workers must reject the endless refrain that "there is no money" for schools, for jobs, for essential social benefits such as Medicare and Social Security, under conditions in which the stock market is soaring and Mr. Bloomberg's personal fortune increased by 28 percent last year to an estimated \$26 billion. Society must be reorganized to meet social needs, not private profit.

A determined fight by the school bus strikers to turn out to the working class as a whole in New York City would win mass support. This is what the union leaders are afraid of. They do not want such a strike to become "contagious," spreading to other section of workers who are facing the same attacks, and threatening to disrupt the relations of the unions with the corporate and political establishment.

Working people in New York are looking for someone to take a stand against Bloomberg and the financial oligarchy that runs the city. We call on all strikers who see the need to begin this fight to contact the Socialist Equality Party.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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