

“I see this as an attack on public education.”

New York City workers and students express support for school bus strikers

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The month-long strike by nearly 9,000 striking school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics has generated popular sympathy despite the best efforts of Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the corporate-controlled news media to slander the strikers as greedy and uncaring towards the 150,000 disabled and non-disabled children they transport and care for each day.

Among city workers—teachers, transit, hospital, sanitation worker and firefighters—there is particular contempt for the billionaire mayor who has slashed city services and refused to sign labor agreements.

No section of the city workers have a contract, from the 75,000 teachers of the city's Department of Education, 38,000 transit workers and more than 10,000 sanitation workers. Currently, they are working under the provisions of old contracts. Despite this common conditions facing all workers, the United Federation of Teachers, the Teamsters and the Transport Workers Union have done nothing to mobilize their members to defend the school bus strikers or the jobs and living standards of their own members.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers and young people in the city about the strike. Benjamin Fenderson, a train operator with 12 years, said, “Bloomberg is clearly the manipulator saying ‘it is not my problem, it is between the private bus companies and the drivers.’ He took away the Employee Protection Provisions. So it is clearly the case he is behind this.

“The bids from the winning bus companies will pay drivers only \$15 an hour and no benefits,” Fenderson said. “They will hire untrained workers jeopardizing the health and safety of the kids.

“This is part of an attack on public education. This goes along with the cuts to education funding and trying to impose standardized student testing evaluations on teachers. Instead of concentrating on educating the kids, they are concentrating on how to save a buck. While more money does not necessarily guarantee better education, budget cuts mean less teachers, equipment, computers, books, lunch programs and after school programs.

“The union doesn’t stand with unions like it did before. It has become everyone for themselves—and this doesn’t make sense. You see photo ops of [Transport Workers Union Local 100 President John] Samuelsen with every other union. It looks good, but he doesn’t do anything for us. There is no strategy to defend the working class.”

Walter Greene, a train conductor with 28 years service, said, “I feel it is unfair for the mayor and the governor to take job security from workers. They will try to take it from us as well. We have been working without a contract for over a year. What can you do if you don’t like the union leadership? Can you stop paying your dues? No. They take your dues out automatically now.”

A teacher for 17 years commented to the WSWWS, “I have a seven-year-old student whose mom is a bus driver. The mom is very upset. The mayor doesn't try to solve the strike. He doesn't care for working people. He thinks he is better than everyone else.” Asked about the affect of the strike and other attacks on public education, she replied, “Once they attack the teachers, one of the biggest unions, then it will be all over. We will be in the hands of the mayor.”

Ralph, who studies mechanical engineering at

LaGuardia Community College, said, “Bloomberg says there is not enough money for the school bus drivers. On what basis does he say that? The problem is people in the mayor’s position just don’t want to distribute the wealth downwards.

“Here we are paying \$1,900 tuition and out-of-state students pay twice that much. They are always trying to squeeze the working class. It seems the employers can always find someone to do the work for less money. Instead of workers getting more, things are increasing inversely with more to go the rich and decreasing opportunities for ordinary people. This is especially impacting the next generation. It doesn’t matter if you have a degree it is still hard to find a job.”

“What the mayor is doing to the school bus drivers sucks,” said Damaris Gonzalez, another LaGuardia student. “They are closing schools and cutting teachers wages too. We are supposed to be the future leaders but our education is being cut. Schools in New York City have been hit so hard and compared to schools in wealthier suburbs they are very bad.”

Her friend, Abraham Montes, added, “Soon enough you’re going to need a college diploma just to compete for a job at McDonalds. The rich are just greedy.”

As for the school bus strike, she said, “Those workers are only trying to make a living and have a family and a decent life. But the mayor and rich are telling people you should be grateful to have a job paying \$10 or \$12 an hour. How do they expect people to live comfortably in a city like New York on that? People are living paycheck to paycheck, always buying discount stuff just to get by. And the rich have been gentrifying neighborhoods in the city and even in rural areas, building lofts that no working person could afford.”

Sanitation drivers in Astoria also spoke with the WSWS. “Bloomberg tried to use the snow storm to bring in private contractors and get rid of our jobs,” one veteran worker said. “It’s the same thing they’re doing to the school bus drivers. He’s so rich he just bought himself another term in office.”

“Bloomberg is a stinking jerk,” said another sanitation worker. “We all have a stake in the fight of the school bus drivers. The mayor has the same plan for all city workers. The unions aren’t even close to what they used to be.”

Firefighters in Astoria invited WSWS reporters into their crew room to discuss the school bus strike. One

officer said he didn’t even know the strike was still going on, while another firefighter said that the union should be blamed for not doing anything to spread the word about the struggle.

“Bloomberg is threatening to close fire stations too. Even the Post Office is eliminating Saturday delivery and that is going to cost jobs. In the meantime, they are hiring part-time “flex” workers that are only guaranteed 30 hours a week and have no benefits. They want these workers to replace the current workers. But these new workers still have to pay union dues.”



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