

Parents speak out in support of New York City school bus strike

Steve Light, A. Woodson
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Sympathy for the nearly 9,000 striking school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics on the part of parents of the students affected by the walkout remains strong in New York City despite the efforts of the city's billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the corporate media to turn them against the strikers.

The vast majority of the parents in the city face working conditions similar to those of the striking bus workers: low wages, reduced benefits and constant threats to job security. To prevent workers and parents from recognizing their common struggle, both the unions and the Bloomberg administration have sought to isolate the strike.

Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 has directly vetoed attempts by the workers to reach out to the parents. A driver in Jamaica, told the WSWs, "The union told us we shouldn't go to speak with teachers, parents. We are told we are limited to specific things, which as far as we can see is sitting here doing nothing."

Bloomberg attacks the bus drivers with the help of the corporate media. The *New York Times*, which has largely halted any coverage of the strike, has only spoken about the "unsparing misery" that it has caused parents and students. The other major newspapers have gone out of their way to get parents to make statements critical of the strikers.

And yet anger is building among parents not against the strikers, but against the Bloomberg administration. Whatever promises it made at the outset of the strike to provide compensation to parents to get their children to school have been largely unfulfilled.

"Every parent I've talked to has about \$1,500 dollars worth of expenses," said Laurie, a driver for Reliant bus company. "They've filled out every form to get reimbursed and they haven't received a penny. It's

getting to the point now where hundreds of kids aren't going to be able to go to school because their parents, who are on fixed incomes, can't afford to take their kids to school anymore. Not only is Bloomberg attacking us, but he's attacking the parents too."

Parents who spoke to the WSWs expressed a general hostility towards Bloomberg and sympathy for the school bus strike.

Delores Fields was walking her school children home. She was angry: "I think the mayor is stupid. It is too much. It is ridiculous. I think the parents should march. He said he was going to make sure no child was left behind. Look, he is making sure they all are being left behind now.

"This is not fun. If we get to school early we have to stand outside in the cold and snow and wait. My child cannot walk that well or that fast. A whole lot of kids cannot get to school. This is her third day at school since the strike began. If you want to take a cab you have to walk quite a distance from the school to catch one. We have to do all this running around to bring her back to the home attendants. We have to get to school on time, and then we have to get home on time for the home attendants to do their work.

"I used to work for the Board of Education. I see this as an attack on public education. The children are our future, and they won't make sure they can get to school safely. I don't think they should take anything away from the drivers. They should pay them and give them the job security they need."

Valerie Williams is the parent of an autistic child who attends the special needs school PS 94. She is also head of the PTA at that school. She told the WSWs: "There should be 80 autistic children bused here every day. I think what is going on here is horrible. I think Bloomberg should have paid the school bus drivers and

matrons, and made sure that their 33-year-old job guarantee is maintained. Bloomberg should pay them! These people get up early. They are at the depots at 5:30 a.m. They pick my daughter up at 7 a.m. They must drive safely through New York City traffic, and 90 minutes is the longest any special needs child can be on the bus.

“I know my driver’s and matron’s cell phone numbers. That is how intimate it is. In December, the bus broke down on Avenue C and East 6th. My driver, William, called me and told me where I could come and pick up my daughter. This was Rainbow Transit. It has been a secure situation for me and my daughter. I felt very comfortable putting her on the bus with those drivers and matrons. This is an anxiety thing for me.

“I will not put my daughter on a bus with drivers who haven’t had this training and I don’t feel this security with them.

“The alternatives are private buses, cabs with vouchers and metro cards. I take my daughter to school every day on mass transit. I have to go with her because she is 10 and not capable of doing things on her own. I wouldn’t trust her safety any other way. My daughter is semi-verbal, and can’t take a cell phone with her. With the old yellow school buses, I trusted the drivers and matrons. We had a system so I would know when my daughter arrived at school and that she arrived on time.

“I cannot be at school and at work both at 8 a.m. I’m lucky. I have flextime, and can make the time up. But I know other parents who can’t be at work on time now because they are bringing their children to school. I know three or four parents who have lost their jobs from this.

“We are having a PTA meeting tomorrow. The school bus strike will come up. It is causing a big problem. I’m not sure what we are going to do.”

David Gomez is also a parent of a student at the school. He commented: “I think this is not right because it breaks up a parent’s normal routine. Parents have to make arrangements with work if they let you. You can’t send your child to school alone today even if the school was a block away.

“I blame Bloomberg. This is one of the most important jobs that there is. This is driving and taking care of school kids’ health and safety while taking them to school. There are parents who are forced to leave their jobs to bring their children to school and

back. There are a very few lucky parents who can afford to do this. “Why should Bloomberg care? He is a billionaire. Why doesn’t he just pay them himself?”



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