

On New York City picket lines school bus strikers discuss struggle

Jerry White, Bryan Dyne
15 February 2013

Two days after New York City's Department of Education opened up bids from private transportation companies, which excluded job and wage protections that school bus employees have depended on for nearly half a century, striking workers across the city expressed frustration and anger over the failure of their union's strike strategy.

From the beginning of the strike by nearly 9,000 school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics on January 16, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 and other city unions insisted that the city's billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, could be pressured into withholding the bids and told workers they could rely on local and state Democratic politicians to bring the billionaire mayor to his "senses."

On Tuesday, Bloomberg went ahead with his plan, which for the first time in three decades opens the door for private contractors to get rid of thousands of senior workers and replace them with casual, part-time employees hired at poverty wages.

In his State of the City address Thursday Bloomberg gloated over his action, saying he had broken the "virtual monopoly" the unions and bus companies had enjoyed for nearly 30 years and opened the way for competitive bidding and the potential of "hundreds of millions of dollars in savings."

He chastised Democratic politicians for lacking the backbone for taking on a city union and defeating it as he had. Pointing to the increased numbers of scab school buses on the road, he declared that the strike was over, adding, "I urge all bus drivers to return to work and I urge Local 1181 leaders to recognize their strike is a lost cause, and to stop hurting our children and their members."

In response to this debacle, ATU Local 1181 President Michael Cordiello issued a curt statement on the union's web site, telling members who have been on the picket lines for a month, "We will be updating you in the very

near future on the direction we will be taking."

In the days following the opening of the bids, strikers who spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters at Atlantic Express depots in Jamaica, Queens and Hunts Point in the Bronx were livid over the lack of information from the union and wanted to discuss how they could find a way forward for their struggle.

One striking worker in Jamaica said, "We're paying the union to represent us, and I ask them, 'Why aren't you doing it?' Everything about our future is hush-hush. They're just looking at how much money they'll make." Raising her voice, she added. "The union doesn't tell us anything even though we want to know what to do. Now that the bids have gone out, what's plan B?"

Another driver said, "The union can't just leave us out here. We don't have anything to fight for now. They should give us a letter or anything really. You can't fight a war without any means to fight."

Marla said, "It's already a disaster. It was from the beginning. The union didn't have a clear idea of what they were doing. They shouldn't have called the strike. Why wasn't the strike discussed at the meeting hall? If we knew what we were fighting for, we could put our all in."

WSWS reporters explained that the fate of the strike was in the hands of the workers themselves because all of the city unions were tied to the corporate and political establishment and opposed to any serious struggle. The reporters said the WSWs was urging workers to form a rank-and-file strike committee to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the unions and fight to mobilize workers throughout the city to defend the strike.

Debrah asked, "Go over union heads to whom? They would have us believe we can only do some things. The union told us we shouldn't go to speak with teachers or parents. We are told we are limited to specific things."

"I want to go back, but under what conditions?" she

asked, clearly worried that a surrender would lead to the destruction of her current wages, benefits and protections. She summed up by saying, “I feel like there is no union.”

Another worker, Hope, said, “The lowest bid is for \$87 million, about \$100 million less than the contracts now. They are talking about cutting pay by 20 percent, taking our summer bonuses. That’s been there for as long as I’ve worked. I didn’t think I’d work for 14 years, but the work was good, so I stayed. How can you now take all of this back?”

Another striker commenting on the blackout of the strike by the big business news media said of the WSWS, “You’re the only ones Bloomberg couldn’t buy out.” His friend, Rafael, thanked the WSWS for publishing the truth about the strike.

On the picket line in the Bronx, Javier commented about the lack of information from the unions. “They’ve been doing something, but they don’t tell us anything.” He also drew parallels between the conditions in the US and across the world. “Bloomberg is a dictator, a new type of dictator. If the working class as a whole stood up against him, things would be different than they are right now—but right now he’s in power. He wants to turn the schools into charters to break the teachers.

“What he wants is what the conditions are like in China. There, they have a strong economy and lots of money at the top, but that all comes from making the wages almost nothing. Bloomberg and the rest of them want the same conditions here.”

Another worker said, “Bloomberg now has the blueprint to screw the rest of the workers, now that he knows the unions won’t fight back. Firefighters will be next on the chopping block.”

Another worker said, “There are employee protection provisions for all the city workers. If a sanitation facility or a firehouse closes, city workers are able to move with the work and keep their seniority. Now they want us to be like day laborers, begging the private companies to give us jobs. If all the union workers could organize together we could destroy the brick wall that’s holding us in.”

The WSWS reporters discussed the importance of rank-and-file strikers breaking out of the isolation imposed by the unions and reaching out to teachers, firefighters, transit and other city workers, along with students and other workers in the city to defend the strike.

Such an appeal, they said, should explain that school bus strikers were standing up for the whole working class against an economic and political system that enriched the financial elite precisely by impoverishing the broad

masses of working people.

While union officials claimed the replacement of Bloomberg with a Democratic mayor would improve conditions, the WSWS reporters pointed out that, from President Obama down, the Democrats were just as ruthless defenders of the wealthy as the Republicans.

“You’re telling the truth about what is going on,” one striker said. “This is a time for the rich. The time when workers had some things is in the past. If we don’t get together, the working class is going to suffer. We have to rally the public. The politicians aren’t going to help, but the public will.

“Something is wrong with the rich. In America and in all countries, the people are getting sick of the rich. They don’t care about ordinary people.”

Another driver, Pam, said, “I don’t believe anyone has the interest of working people at heart but us. We need to know what to do next. How can they pay people \$7.25 minimum wage or even \$9? How do you pay rent with that? The rich don’t know what it is like to go without electricity. Why should we workers pay for the rich to stay rich?

“I’m totally for appealing to other workers in the city. I’m glad you came to the picket line to discuss these issues. I thought that the Democrats were in our favor. But it’s easy for them to promise this and that. I see that they are cutting Medicare and other programs, just like the Republicans.

“It’s the working people who are the source of their income. It’s bizarre that single mothers doing this job should be paid \$9 an hour when they have to pay \$1,800 for rent, but we’re supposed to be so happy that women can now go to war and fight on the front lines.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact