

Bloomberg boasts of breaking New York bus strike as part of assault on public education

Sandy English
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New York City's billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg delivered a shamelessly self-aggrandizing "State of the City" address—his last after 11 years in office—boasting of his breaking of a strike by nearly 9,000 New York City school bus workers and linking it directly to his administration's overall assault on public education.

Bloomberg bragged about his decision for the first time in 33 years to put school bus contracts out to bid while excluding a clause known as Employee Protection Provisions (EPP), which for half a century has protected workers' jobs and wages.

Under the EPP, no matter which company wins a bid, drivers, attendants and mechanics keep their jobs and their pay scale. Without the EPP, companies with the lowest bids will replace the school bus workers with lower-paid and inexperienced drivers.

"I'm glad to report that every day more and more buses are on the road transporting students to school," he continued. He urged the strikers to return to work and abandon the "lost cause" of trying to defend their jobs, wages and conditions of work built up over decades of service to the city.

The billionaire mayor went on to chastise Democratic office holders and mayoral candidates for failing to come out in support of the strike breaking, stating that "we haven't had a lot of political supporting in taking this issue on." The implication was clear: the Democrats back such moves but won't say so openly because they are concerned about losing votes in the upcoming election.

Bloomberg cast himself as a champion of the city's school children against "special interests," a category he uses to define school bus workers defending their jobs, parents and students trying to stop the closing of their schools in favor of privately run charter schools and anyone seeking to fight the subordination of public education to the profit system.

In New York City, the school bus workers were clearly seen by the Bloomberg administration as the low-hanging fruit of the process of "education reform". The phrase is used to put a progressive shine on a broad corporate-sponsored strategy of dismantling public education and smashing the living standards of education workers.

The strategy has been implemented at the federal level under both Republicans and Democrats. Bush's No Child Left Behind and Obama's Race to the Top programs, both promoted backward social policies such as teacher evaluation by student testing and publicly funded, privately run charter schools as well as drastic

cost-cutting in public education.

As on the national level, in New York, the banks and corporations, the Democratic Party and, most significantly, the teachers' union are the three partners that are leading the dismantling of public education, including the assault on the school bus drivers.

In fact, student transportation has been of concern to ruling circles for some time now. In December of last year, a policy brief on New York State pupil transportation costs by the Citizens Budget Commission noted that statewide, transportation accounted for 5.7 percent of school spending. One of its central proposals was for "a lower overall average reimbursement rate. These changes would promote greater efficiency by giving districts a greater stake in achieving costs savings." While the brief does not explicitly propose the slashing of wages and benefits for school transportation workers, that is its logical conclusion, and the one taken up in the largest school district in the state, New York City.

Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo's New York State Education Reform Commission, formed in April 2012, has played a leading role in preparing new attacks on all aspects of public education, including the determination to drive down student transportation costs.

The commission's report last year listed as one of its goals the need to address, "the biggest cost drivers in education and areas where spending exceeds the rate of inflation, including special education, transportation, pension and benefits." Several times, the report emphasized the need to "Identify ways to reduce transportation costs ..."

The commission has also proposed longer school years and longer school days, which would significantly increase yellow-bus transportation costs, making attacks on costs in transportation—especially the wages and benefits of school bus workers—all the more urgent.

In fact, it is becoming increasingly clear that it is the misnamed education reform itself that has played a central role in driving up student transportation costs. Public School Choice has been a major endeavor of the New York City Department of Education to encourage parents and students to leave schools that are "failing". Students often relocate to schools much farther away from their homes, and the city incurs the cost of transporting them.

The commission's membership is representative of the social forces that are behind education reform. It is chaired by billionaire Richard Parsons, a former CEO of Time Warner, a retired

chairman of Citigroup, and current senior advisor to Providence Equity Partners. He has also served as on George W. Bush's Social Security task force and Barack Obama's Council on Jobs and Competitiveness.

The commission also includes Sanford Weill, the billionaire former CEO and Chairman of Citigroup. Also a member is Geoffrey Canada, the charter school operator, and a third billionaire, the CEO of Canada's Harlem Children's Zone, Stanley Druckenmiller. Druckenmiller is a former Chairman and President of Duquesne Capital.

Significantly, this corporate-dominated Commission also includes Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), who was president for 12 years of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City.

Why the UFT refused to mobilize any support for the school bus strike is readily apparent when one looks at what the Union has to say about the Cuomo commission. One article titled, "Cuomo proposes bold changes to education," praises the commission. UFT president Michael Mulgrew declared: "We're glad to see the governor's panel making commonsense, research-based recommendations about improving our schools ..."

The article—published *a day after the school bus drivers were forced out on strike*—concluded by saying, "The commission named special education and pupil transportation as two areas of potential savings and said they would review district-by-district returns on educational investment and productivity."

Charter schools as well have been a new growth area for school busing. About 20 percent of charter students ride school buses, as opposed to 9 percent of public school children, according to an estimate by the Independent Budget Office.

It is not an accident that charter-school proponent Geoffrey Canada and his bankroller Stanley Druckenmiller sit on a commission that has singled out slashing transportation costs as one of its main goals. There is an intimate relationship between slashing the living standards of school bus workers and attacking public education as a whole, including reducing pay and benefits for teachers.

New York City now has 159 charter schools; over a third of these have been started in the last three years. Charters pay teachers less and make them work longer hours.

Charters are literally replacing public schools, with dozens moving into space that has been vacated by schools that Bloomberg has closed—over 140 public schools have closed or are now in the process of closing since Bloomberg took office in 2002.

These so-called co-locations, in which charters share a public school building in the astronomically expensive real estate market of New York City with public schools, become paragons of inequality. Better-funded charters have access to funds for resources that are unavailable to public school students, such as brand new libraries.

Public funding for charter schools is expected to increase by at least \$50 million in the 2014 city education budget, and, according to some projections, by twice that amount.

Randi Weingarten and the AFT have also facilitated the privatization of education. In 2009, the union announced a major "union-led education innovation" with funding from the Bill and

Melinda Gates Foundation. Bill Gates, the richest person in the United States, is a major proponent and funder of charter schools. In 2010, to the disgust of hundreds of thousands of teachers around the US, Gates was the keynote speaker at the AFT's annual convention.

Nor will the unions take up the least fight against other attacks on education in New York City. The UFT has been working without a contract for four years. In the 2014 education budget Bloomberg has proposed cutting 2,300 teacher jobs by attrition. Bloomberg and Cuomo have presided over a steady stream of public education job losses, 8,000 over the last few years by some estimates.

Other basic education funding will be cut, including contracts for conflict resolution and bullying, after school programs, including tutoring and athletics, and teachers' professional development. Bloomberg said the schools would be forced to eliminate over 700,000 hours of after-school programs in 2013-2014.

The UFT has organized, given the numbers of teachers, parents, and students in New York City, only minuscule protests against layoffs and budget cuts. Nothing else is to be expected in 2013, as was evinced by the UFT boycott of the striking school bus workers' rally on Sunday.

In the past year, both the city and state have made a concerted push to base teacher evaluations on student test scores. Teacher evaluation by student testing is a mainstay of Obama's Race to the Top program, which offers education funding to states that implement it. In February 2012, Cuomo succeeded in tying teacher evaluation to New York State education aid.

This led last month to the refusal by Bloomberg to negotiate with the UFT over the best way to phase-in teacher evaluations—which the UFT has accepted in principal—and the loss of over \$250 million in funds to the city school system.

Tens of thousands of teachers and other education workers in New York City are disgusted with all aspects of so-called education reform, and many correctly see the attack on the school bus drivers as a prelude to an even more vicious blow against public education as a whole.

But no teacher, school bus driver or other worker in education can depend on the UFT or any of the other education unions to wage even a minimal struggle to stop the dismantling of public education. The unions are full partners with the government and corporations in this endeavor. They want to phase in the reforms perhaps more slowly than Bloomberg would, but there are no essential differences in policy.



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