

Union calls off New York school bus strike, telling workers to rely on Democrats

Bill Van Auken
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The decision announced Friday night to end the month-old strike by New York City bus workers is an abject betrayal by the unions that will have far-reaching consequences, for bus workers and for the entire working class.

Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181, the union representing the nearly 9,000 drivers, matrons and mechanics who walked off the job on January 16 to defend a 33-year-old contract provision protecting their jobs and seniority rights, told its members to return to work Wednesday, February 20, when school resumes after a two-day mid-winter recess.

None of the issues that workers went on strike over have been resolved. Thousands face the loss of their jobs when the city awards new contracts to private bus companies. Those who are able to keep their jobs will face demands for drastic cuts in wages and benefits.

From its outset, the strike has given stark expression to the immense class divide in New York City and nationally, with workers making on average \$35,000 a year confronting Mayor Michael Bloomberg, worth some \$26 billion, who has sought to destroy their jobs and drive down their wages.

The determination of these workers, many of them immigrants drawn from every corner of the globe, has inspired the working class of New York City, the entire country and indeed internationally, who want to see a real fight against the financial aristocracy that Bloomberg personifies.

As its actions Friday underscored, however, the union purporting to represent the workers has been the chief obstacle to a struggle of the workers to defend their livelihoods.

The president of Local 1181 of the ATU, Michael Cordiello, and ATU International President Larry Hanley told workers they should go back to work on the basis of a letter signed by five candidates for the Democratic nomination for mayor of New York. The five called for an end to the strike and promised that if elected they would “revisit the school transportation system and contracts.”

This is a fraud. The Democrats no less than the

Republicans are determined to force workers to pay for the economic crisis created by the ruling class. However, they prefer to do so using the services of the highly paid functionaries that control the unions. From the beginning, the ATU saw the strike as a means of maintaining its own position, with the workers merely used as pawns in the union’s relations with the political establishment and the corporations.

Reflecting their justified fear of the rank-and-file workers, the Local 1181 leadership did not call a membership meeting to discuss the return to work. The announcement was instead made in a telephone call-in “town meeting,” where there was no discussion and only vetted questions were allowed. A union flack stated at the outset that there were far too many questions to allow any member to actually speak.

While rank-and-file workers said the ATU’s bylaws demand a membership vote to end a strike, that requirement was dispensed with by Cordiello, who said that the local’s executive board had voted at an unannounced meeting that afternoon to call it off.

The issue in the strike was vital: the defense of the Employee Protection Provisions (EPP), which guarantees the jobs of bus drivers regardless of which companies win contract bids. Without the EPP, bus companies will be able to push out senior workers and reap profits off of a low-wage, part-time workforce.

Bloomberg, who gloated over his successful strike-breaking during his State of the City speech Thursday, urging workers to give up their struggle as a “lost cause,” has insisted that the city has scrapped the job guarantees as a means of imposing cost savings.

This is only part of the story. Bloomberg targeted the school bus drivers, deliberately provoking a strike by refusing to negotiate with a union leadership that was clearly willing to make major concessions and was unwilling to lead any real struggle. His aim was to inflict a crushing defeat, thereby setting the stage for a new wave of attacks on the entire municipal workforce.

His success is facilitated not just by the ATU and Local

1181, but by all the city's major unions, which refused to lift a finger in defense of the school bus workers. Each of these unions are preparing to impose concessions on their own workers.

The United Federation of Teachers, which has been working without a new contract for four years and whose 200,000 members work closely with the school bus workers, did nothing to defend the strikers. Instead, the UFT has worked together with big business leaders on state commissions to come up with proposals for slashing costs in school transportation, which Bloomberg has now implemented.

Transport Workers Union Local 100, representing 35,000 bus and subway workers, whose contract expired over a year ago, did nothing to defend their fellow transportation workers. Nor did AFSCME municipal workers' locals, which are similarly working without a new agreement.

Together, the unions have kept the school bus workers struggle isolated. This is not due to any lack of sympathy and support for their struggle. Rather, it is because of the sharp divergence of interests between the unions and the workers they claim to represent. The unions do not want to see any popular struggle that would disrupt their relations with the financial and political establishments of which they are a part.

Instead of relying on their own strength and a fight to mobilize the support of wider layers of the working class in struggle, the ATU bureaucrats told workers in Friday night's conference call to place their faith in the Democrats, on the one hand, and in lawsuits filed by the bus contractors.

Cordiello demagogically declared that after next January, "We will still be here, but Mayor Bloomberg will be gone." But based on the awarding of the new bids, some 2,300 bus drivers, matrons and mechanics will also be "gone" by then, having lost their jobs.

Hanley claimed that the Democrats' letter showed that the only real problem facing the workers was "one stubborn billionaire who for some reason has decided in his last year as mayor to make school bus workers the enemy of the public."

This is a conscious lie. Bloomberg's policies are not fundamentally different from those being pursued by New York State's Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo or, for that matter, Democratic President Barack Obama.

The promises of the five Democratic mayoral hopefuls are not worth the paper they are written on. Once in office, they will be no different than Democratic Party mayors like Rahm Emanuel in Chicago, who, with the collaboration of the teachers union, suppressed a strike last year and is now carrying out school shutdowns, teachers layoffs and attacks on education employees.

The second supposed basis for ending the strike is equally outrageous. The union is telling workers to take comfort from lawsuits filed by the existing bus contractors to allow them to remove the EPP job protection from their own contracts to make them competitive. This, the union claims, could tie up the new contracts in court until a Democratic mayor is able to come to the rescue.

Among the questions that the union officials did take was one from a worker wanting to know if it was true that Local 1181 was negotiating 20 percent cuts in wages demanded by the companies. Cordiello did not rule out such an eventuality, cautioning that the negotiations were "going to be a tough one" and that "contractors need to be competitive."

Another worker demanded to know "what sense is it to go back to work if we don't have a contract?" The local president answered that the last negotiations took over a year and asked whether he wanted to stay on the picket line that long.

After the call-in session, a bus striker spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*, expressing the widespread anger among the workers. "I can't see what we are going to gain from this," she said. "Nothing was resolved, and we are in a worse position now than at the beginning of the strike. The contractors are demanding a 20 percent wage cut, and they don't want to pay for our health care. They're going to go after our holiday pay and other benefits.

"Hanley and Cordiello say we have to be political, but they mean sending more money to their political action committees. The Democrats are not going to preserve anything. The mayoral candidates are out to get our votes. They are just as much thieves as the president and the other politicians.

"The union never had the decency to call a membership meeting. They are cowards and weak and can't face the membership. That's why they do it by telephone."



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