

New York City school bus workers express anger over conduct of strike

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The leadership of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) called off the New York City bus workers' strike on Friday a month after it began. No vote was taken by the membership, and the union announced its decision via a conference call. Questions from workers were screened, and workers were given little information.

The pretext given by ATU Local 1181 president Michael Cordiello and ATU international president Larry Hanley for the back-to-work order was a letter signed by the five Democratic Party mayoral candidates calling for an end to the strike.

The candidates made the hollow pledge that a Democratic administration would "revisit the school bus transportation system and contracts" if they are elected. In the meantime, some 2,300 workers face the loss of their jobs or being forced to reapply for a fraction of their former compensation.

Anyone who reads the text of the letter knows that nothing has been even promised. Neither here nor anywhere else have the Democratic candidates defended the Employee Protection Provisions or EPP. The EPP has been included in bids that the Department of Education puts up annually for service to third-party private bus contractors since 1979. It allows drivers to retain their seniority and wage scale no matter which company wins a contract with the city.

The strike was sparked on January 16 by multibillionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg's decision to issue bids excluding the EPP for 1,100 of the over 7,000 bus routes. When he made good on this pledge earlier this month, the union's strategy of pressing him and other politicians was exposed.

The ATU had systematically isolated the strike and sought to prevent both the circulation of information among workers and discussion about the way to defend the strike. In spite of a media blackout, there was broad and growing support for the strike among New York City

workers, many of whom saw the strike as a defense of public education. The union could only present a worthless pledge from the Democratic Party as a reason for shutting down the strike.

At Friday's meeting, Local 1181 President Cordiello, in answering a question from a worker, refused to rule out sweeping concessions in contract negotiations, including a 20 percent wage cut demanded by the companies.

There is widespread dissatisfaction with the way the strike was ended by the union. While most workers are glad to get back to work and receive a regular paycheck, there is an understanding that nothing had been won. As one bus worker commented on Facebook, "We lost a month's wages and paid out a few expensive medical bills. For what? Are you kidding? For a half-witted empty promise from a handful of candidates? Really? That's what it came down to?"

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to bus workers about the ending of the strike by the union, what they had thought, and what they could expect next.

Many workers told us that the strike had been a defeat, and that the union was directly responsible. While most workers expressed relief that they would resume getting regular paychecks for the time being, they were acutely aware that the EPP had not been preserved. Most of those who spoke to the WSWWS had little faith in the promises of the Democratic mayoral candidates, and some pointed out that the first thing that the five candidates had asked for in their letter was for a stop to the strike.

Giuseppe, a bus driver for 19 years, had originally encountered the World Socialist Web Site on the picket line in Staten Island. He became progressively angrier the more he talked about the workers' situation in the aftermath of the strike.

"The strike did not make a difference," he said. "We showed that we are strong, that we could strike anytime. A lot of people were upset on the call telling us the strike

was over. I hope they can do something now. But the fight has to be all together, all the population, not just the ATU.

“In the US, it is not like in Italy or Europe, where the workers go out together. When the unions were born, people were killed. Now the union is paid off. Union leaders make \$200,000 or more. They only care about the dues. They say they get the ones running for mayor to do something. We need a political majority of all of us together. That takes time.

“The mayor is a liar. We were up against the wall. If it is up to the mayor, more people will be on unemployment and poor. That is what the rich want. The country cannot afford this. I own my house. If I go on unemployment and welfare, I lose my house. There is no future for my son. Today, everybody goes to school. But they graduate college and cannot get jobs, just McDonald’s. The rich are getting richer. They want to take out the middle class. If we understand that, we can fight, if the middle class and the poor fight together.”

Another driver with ten years’ experience who lives in the Bronx told us, “The drivers are losing, not the union, not the mayor: they didn’t lose anything. It’s going to be hard to get back the money we lost. It was like being in a refrigerator being in this strike: it was cold out there, and hard always thinking about your payments, not knowing what was going on, and getting \$30 a day. We only got one check from the international.

Noting that the strike was called off on a Friday, and there is no school on Monday and Tuesday, the worker said, “The union is supposed to pay us for Monday and Tuesday, but it’s going to be next Friday until we get a check for this Wednesday through Friday. We will still be getting paid like we were on strike for over a week. We’re also going to lose our vacation pay now,” the driver said, referring to the normal February school break, which was cancelled because of days lost due to Hurricane Sandy.

The driver also suggested that there would be victimization of workers when they return: “When we work, we get urine and alcohol tests and well as physicals, randomly. When we go back on Wednesday, see how many people are going to be checked.”

“I have two thoughts,” he added. “The union and the companies worked together. The union leaders make over \$200,000 a year and delegates can get up to \$85,000 a year” between their salaries and what the union gives them. “Who did this strike benefit? The other thing is, we may not lose the EPP, but in the new contract, they will freeze the pay and cut our hours so much that the EPP

won’t matter.”

Another worker, also from the Bronx told us, “It shouldn’t have ended this way. We were betrayed. It’s not only affecting us but every other union. There should have other workers at the march [on February 10]. We’re the only ones who stood up to Bloomberg.”

Jean from Brooklyn told the WSWS, “It is unfortunate the strike ended without a positive result. The union didn’t have a plan B. People forgot about us. We were out there by ourselves. Nobody [from the union] came to let us know what was happening.”

Jean added: “If we had a clear strategy, we could have reached out to other workers. This is a success for Bloomberg. The union should have thought about outreach to other workers. Who’s going to be next? If the others had come to help we would have been more effective. I’m very disappointed at the union, the politicians. All those families [of strikers] had no leadership.

“I agree with all these ideas that are coming from you people [the WSWS]. We found ourselves against the wall. I’m thanking you guys for what you did.”

Another driver told us, “We’re dying to go back to work but we really need the EPP. They’re just trying to get money from us one way or another. I work more than 12 hours a day; nobody cares about that. They just care about money. We voted for Obama but he and Cuomo have said nothing. That’s not right.”

Clive, who works out of one of the Queens barns, and has been reading the WSWS regularly, agreed with a reporter that the Democrats cannot be trusted to do anything for the workers. “I don’t think we won. The union is looking out for themselves. The union will always survive, even if they get other workers.” He added, “I appreciate what you’ve done [in covering the strike].”



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