

Lessons of the New York City school bus strike

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With its decision to shut down the month-long strike of 9,000 school bus workers in New York City—without even the pretense of a membership vote—the Amalgamated Transit Union and other city unions inflicted a defeat on the workers that will only encourage the Bloomberg administration to press ahead with its anti-working class agenda.

After fighting the city's billionaire mayor for more than four weeks, workers were incensed at the unilateral surrender by the ATU, which leaves more than a quarter of the striking workers facing the loss of their jobs by June, and the rest vulnerable to the demands by school bus contractors for a 20 percent wage cut, health care givebacks and the elimination of long-standing job, wage and pension protections on the remaining routes.

For the first time in more than three decades, the mayor opened up student transportation to competitive bidding, giving the school bus companies a green light to fire the current workforce and replace them with a casual part-time workers earning poverty wages.

The struggle in the nation's most populous city and center of finance capital revealed the class dynamic being played out all over the US and the world. On the one side stood the school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics—many of them immigrant workers and single mothers barely earning enough to survive in one of the world's most expensive cities. Their determination, which won the admiration and sympathy of working people everywhere—expressed the growing sentiment that the working class has no choice but to fight the unrelenting attacks on their jobs and living standards.

On the other side stood Mayor Michael Bloomberg whose personal fortune is estimated to be \$26 billion—or more than 700,000 times the average annual

income of a school bus driver. The mayor personifies the criminality and avarice of the corporate and financial elite, which after provoking the worst economic meltdown since the Great Depression, is determined to reduce the working class to poverty and slave-like conditions.

During the course of the strike workers increasingly came to realize they were in a conflict with the entire economic and political order, which insists that the social rights of workers are unaffordable, even as the stock market and corporate profits soar.

The corporate-controlled media—from Bloomberg News and the Murdoch gutter press to the ostensibly liberal *New York Times*—slandered the strikers and blacked out their struggle. Meanwhile, the city dispatched hundreds of police to pen strikers behind barricades and threaten them with arrest if they did anything to stop the scab busses racing through their picket lines.

The most critical role in defeating the strike was played by the ATU and other unions, which no less than the city officials, police and school bus contractors, worked deliberately and consciously to isolate the strike, starve workers into submission and block a fight for a broader mobilization of the working class.

From the beginning, the ATU was opposed to any strike at all. It only called the walkout after Bloomberg threatened to break up the long-standing relations between the ATU and the school bus contractors. Within days of the strike—even after the National Labor Relations Board declared it legal—the ATU and the New York City Central Labor Council offered to end the walkout, send workers back to work without a contract and collaborate with Bloomberg and the bus contractors to slash labor costs.

Workers were left on picket lines in isolated areas of the city, with no information from the union, and facing economic ruin with pitiful strike pay and no medical benefits. When workers strove to break out of this isolation and appeal directly to parents and teachers, the ATU blocked them.

The only major protest, the February 10 march across Brooklyn Bridge to City Hall, was held on a Sunday in order to have the least impact, while other city unions did nothing to mobilize the 1.3 million unionized workers in New York City, including the nearly 300,000 teachers, firefighters, transit, sanitation and other municipal workers who are working under expired contracts and are next on the chopping block.

The last thing that the leaders of the ATU, United Federation of Teachers, Transport Workers Union and other unions wanted was a powerful movement of the working class that would threaten their deep and intimate connections with the corporate and political establishment. This includes the direct participation of the UFT and other unions in the school privatization schemes promoted by Bloomberg and Governor Andrew Cuomo, which explicitly targeted school bus drivers for cost-cutting attacks.

From the beginning, the ATU made it clear it was willing to sign away the jobs and living standards of its members, as it has done in the New York City suburbs of Long Island and around the country, if Bloomberg allowed the highly paid union functionaries to retain their “seat at the table” and the franchise on the collection of dues money from school bus workers, no matter how little they make.

The way the strike was shut down epitomizes how hostile the union apparatus is toward the workers trapped inside these organizations. Without a meeting or vote, ATU Local 1181 president Michael Cordiello and international president Larry Hanley informed the members during a 45-minute teleconference call that the executive board had suspended the strike. Prior to that, the international ATU solicited the statements from Democratic mayoral candidates, as a “political cover” for ending the strike.

The Democrats who joined Bloomberg’s call for workers to go back to work without a contract wrote in their letter that, if elected, they would “revisit the school bus transportation system and contracts” next January, while remaining “fiscally responsible for

taxpayers.”

This is cold comfort for some 2,300 workers who will lose their jobs in the meantime, while remaining workers face savage wage and benefit cuts by private bus contractors demanding to remain “competitive” with the companies that submitted new bids.

The Democrats, from Obama and Governor Cuomo on down, are just as much committed to defending the financial elite and attacking the working class as the “independent” Bloomberg and the Republicans.

The union apparatus promotes these enemies because the Democrats tend more than the Republicans to use the services of the trade union bureaucracy to impose the dictates of the ruling class on workers.

In the face of the offensive to wipe out every social right won over a century of struggle, the working class must advance its own political strategy. This is not the election of more big-business politicians but mobilization of the united strength of the working class through new organizations of industrial and political struggle, independent of the bought-and-paid for trade unions and Democratic Party politicians. The aim of this movement must be the establishment of a workers’ government, ending the rule of the financial oligarchy and the reorganization of economic life to meet human needs, not private profit.

The struggle of the New York City school bus workers is far from over. The lessons of this betrayal must be assimilated. Above all, it has demonstrated the burning need for a new leadership in the working class. From the outset of this strike, only the World Socialist Web Site and the Socialist Equality Party provided a voice for the workers and a way forward in their struggle.

The SEP calls on school bus workers and all those who have supported their struggle to join in the task of building the new leadership that is required and arming the coming struggles with a revolutionary program and perspective. We urge you to contact us here .



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