

Many workers replaced by strikebreakers

Returning New York City school bus drivers, escorts face retribution after union betrayal

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22 February 2013

Following the union's termination of the month-long strike against the city's ending of job protections, New York City school bus drivers, escorts and mechanics returned to work on Wednesday. Already, the effects of the betrayal by the Amalgamated Transit Union have become evident, with hundreds of workers receiving layoff notices, in what is undoubtedly only the beginning of escalating attacks against the returning workers.

The ATU Local 1181 shut down the strike after the city's billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg accepted bids from contractors, which excluded the Employment Protection Provision (EPP). This provision, established in a bitter strike in 1979, allowed workers to maintain pay and benefits regardless of which private company won city contracts to operate bus routes.

Using the pretense of a worthless commitment from the city's Democratic mayoral candidates to "revisit" the bidding process at some time in the future, the Local 1181 leadership called off the strike without even a membership vote. In the meantime, as many as 3,000 of the 8,800 student transportation workers face layoff this June as 1,100 routes are contracted out to the new low-cost bidders who no longer have to hire from a citywide seniority list. The rest face demands for 20 percent wage cuts and other concessions.

Adding insult to injury, the companies are wasting no time in using the ATU capitulation to carry out retribution against the drivers and escorts. Numerous reports are coming in of workers being told by companies not to come to work or arriving at job sites only to find that they have been permanently replaced by scabs. Following one such report regarding 100 escorts (also known as matrons) who work for Canal

Escorts, a company based in Brooklyn, the union issued a toothless statement that it would take "all appropriate actions to defend our members."

The matrons were supposedly laid off because the company they worked for went out of business, though the same person also owns Boro Wide Buses and JoFaz Transportation, both of which also provide school bus services. The owner, Joseph Fazzia, is quoted by the *New York Post* as shouting at the matrons, "This union thinks they can tell me what to do—they can go f--k themselves!"

The matrons were told that they could reapply for work, but only with a different union, one of those that did not strike. This is part of a shell game in which a single owner operates multiple "companies" under different names, which can be opened and closed to lay off and rehire workers at will. Without the EPP workers will no longer be guaranteed jobs and if they are hired, it will mean a loss of seniority, drastic cuts in pay, and reduction or elimination of benefits.

During the strike, companies hired scabs and threatened to make them permanent. The WSWs has received information from workers that 37 drivers and 31 matrons at Rainbow in Astoria, Queens and Avenue U, Brooklyn were also fired. Published accounts also indicate firings at Tufaro Bus Company, City Wide, All American, and Boro Wide Buses.

The WSWs spoke with some of the victimized drivers.

Ronald, a driver for the Rainbow school bus company in Astoria, explained that the company called him Tuesday, the day before all drivers and matrons were to report back to work, and told him, "Don't come tomorrow." He asked them why and was told,

“Because we replaced you because you participated in the strike.” He was told to call the union. Ronald said that he thought Rainbow fired about 26 people and that another company, JoFaz, in the Bronx, fired all of its matrons who were in Local 1181. The union told him to call unemployment, that it was an illegal decision.

Pathos, another Rainbow driver, who had previously worked for Varsity starting in 1995, said, “We were striking for almost a month to get the EPP back. The union asked us to go back to work. Nobody knew what was going on.”

Pathos continued, “Somebody, I think his name is Gengi, called me from Rainbow and told me I cannot come in. I was replaced. Almost 37 drivers, of maybe 500 drivers at Rainbow, and 31 matrons, there are less of them than drivers, were fired from Rainbow. There are also drivers from JoFaz in the Bronx who were fired. I told the guys we have to go to the union. Twenty-five guys from Rainbow went to the union and then five more guys came in, so 30 guys from Rainbow. The delegate from the union told us, ‘We cannot do anything for now. Go to the unemployment and we will go to court.’”

“They already have replacements for us,” Pathos went on. “I know this because a driver, one not fired, said he saw a trip card with my name on it erased and they put another name on it. I have a feeling they were picking drivers who were for the strike and on the picket lines. I have asked others if they have the right to fire us after the strike and the others asking this, too.”

Based on these reports, it appears that some firings are targeted specifically at more militant workers and others are simply being done en masse. In an indication that more job losses are to come, a spokesperson for a coalition of 20 bus companies stated, “... each company will be making its own decision regarding replacement workers it hired during the strike and the status of striking drivers and matrons.”

Many workers at Rainbow did not know that other workers there had been laid off. The union is continuing to provide no information. It may be that the laid-off workers at Rainbow are being chosen by seniority in order to rid the companies of higher paid workers with more accrued pension time.

Jean, a Rainbow driver, commented, “While the union says it is going to do something to get their [the laid off workers’] jobs back, they will only have 2 or 3

months left by the time they come back because the school year ends in June. Then thousands can lose jobs from companies that don’t get their bids accepted. I don’t know when we learn that. We got strapped. Everywhere people are putting us down. We needed coverage but many parents don’t know why we were out because all the news presented was Bloomberg blaming us. Now we will have to survive with any other company when our company does not get a contract from the city. We had to deal with Bloomberg and he is a dictator.”

Another driver, Spiro, was bitterly angry. “I lost \$4,000 for the month we were on strike. And it is not just the 9,000 workers that they say but we have families, so it is 29,000 they are hurting. And there are still more affected beyond the families. The city says the school transportation costs \$1.1 billion but our wages are only \$300 million total. I want to know where the other \$800 million is going, whose pockets? We got nothing from the strike. We feel the union did not help us.”



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