

New York school bus workers form rank-and-file committee

Bill Van Auken
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On Tuesday, the eve of their return to work, over 50 New York City bus drivers and escorts met to discuss the betrayal of their more than four-week strike and to form a rank-and-file committee to defend their interests.

The meeting was addressed by two long-time school bus drivers and by *World Socialist Web Site* reporter Jerry White. During a lengthy discussion, workers expressed their anger at the union's conduct of the strike as well as their determination to continue their struggle.

The workers gathered in Queens four days after Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 called off the strike during a teleconference, without even convening a union meeting, much less allowing the workers to vote on the decision.

Nearly 9,000 school bus drivers, escorts and mechanics walked off the job on January 16 in a strike against the decision by New York City's Mayor Michael Bloomberg to open up student transportation to competitive bidding. Bloomberg insisted that the new contracts exclude Employment Protection Provisions (EPP) that for 33 years had guaranteed the jobs and seniority of the workers, regardless of which companies won the Department of Education contracts.

The strike was staged by the union as a means of pressuring Bloomberg to postpone the contract bids while negotiating cost-cutting concessions with the ATU. The billionaire mayor went ahead with accepting the bids, and the union moved to wind up the strike. ATU International President Larry Hanley sought political cover by soliciting an empty promise from five Democratic mayoral candidates that they would "revisit" the school bus contracts if elected.

Now, as many as 3,000 workers face the loss of their jobs at the end of the school year, while the bus companies that still have contracts are demanding 20 percent wage cuts from their workers. Even as school bus runs resumed on Wednesday, hundreds of workers received layoff notices, having been permanently replaced by scabs.

In opening up Tuesday afternoon's meeting, a veteran bus driver stressed that it was "not a union meeting," but a meeting "by the members and for the members." She insisted that the workers had "every right to have meetings separate from the union to discuss issues, to protect our interests and to stay informed."

She praised the workers' courage and solidarity in more than four weeks walking picket lines in frigid weather, slandered by Bloomberg and the media for "leaving the children stranded." The

media and political establishment made no mention of the bus workers' own situation, in which they had no paychecks, no benefits and no information from the union. She stressed that the meeting was an opportunity to discuss and ask questions that had been denied the workers by the union's "teleconference town halls."

She added that the only exception to the media slander and blackout had been the *World Socialist Web Site*, a remark that drew comments of agreement from the audience. She noted that union officials had been calling up members telling them that they were not allowed to attend the meeting and that the WSWS was a "communist newspaper."

"They are socialist," she said. "They are for working class people. The only ones calling them communists are the corporations and the rich. They were out there every day with us."

The second speaker, a driver who had participated in the 1979 strike against the Democratic administration of Mayor Ed Koch, said that the union had called off the strike on "a song and a prayer" based on a promise made by Democratic politicians aiming to win both workers' and parents' votes. He warned that these politicians were not going to do anything once elected, and those who lost their jobs would be placed on hiring lists that at best would bring them back at new-hire pay of \$14.50.

He added that Local 1181 president, Michael Cordiello, was preparing to bargain with the different companies separately without any master contract or common expiration date, thus "guaranteeing that you won't go on strike, or if you do, you'll be alone out there in the street."

He said that the union was preparing to bring in conditions similar to those prevailing among the workers it represents on Long Island, where bus drivers are part-timers working for poverty wages.

He said that workers had "to wake up before it's too late" as "they're selling us out."

The speaker then invited Jerry White from the *World Socialist Web Site* to speak, noting that the WSWS had posted 40 articles on the strike, explaining the political issues in the struggle and providing the only media "the members could speak through without bias."

White told the school bus workers that from the beginning of their fight, the *World Socialist Web Site* had recognized its immense importance for the whole working class. Pitting workers making an average salary of \$34,000 against a mayor worth over

\$25 billion, it epitomized the social inequality that pervades life in New York City and around the country.

“Everywhere the refrain is the same: there is no money, even as corporate profits and the stock market soar, and companies sit on a \$1.7 trillion cash hoard,” he said. “So when you began your struggle—in the country’s most populous city and the financial center of American capitalism—millions of workers throughout the city, country and the world were inspired to see the American working class stand up to the corporate and financial elites.”

From the outset of the strike, he added, it had been clear that “the ATU and the other city unions had no intention of waging the type of struggle necessary to defeat Bloomberg and the corporate interests behind him. Instead, they had offered to end the strike and negotiate concessions, even after the NLRB ruled it to be legal.”

White warned workers against the union’s claims that the Democrats would come to their rescue. “Once they are in office they will attack school bus drivers, escorts and other city workers just as viciously as Bloomberg,” he said, noting that New York state’s Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo had vetoed legislation that would have guaranteed workers the EPP in future contracts with the city.

“These are not the friends of workers—they are the bitterest of enemies,” White said. “But they are the friends of Hanley, Cordiello & Co. Unlike the Republicans who seek to get rid of the unions, the Democrats are more crafty and sophisticated. They know they can achieve the same aims by working with the unions rather than without them.”

The union itself was fighting for interests that were separate and hostile to those of ordinary workers, White explained, and was willing to trade massive concessions for retaining the ability “to continue collecting dues from the next batch of school bus drivers, even if they are working for poverty wages without the slightest job security.”

This, he noted, was not just the case with Local 1181, but also the larger unions, including the United Federation of Teachers, AFSCME, and the TWU, which had worked deliberately to prevent the school bus strike from developing into a broader movement of the working class that would upset their relations with the city’s political and corporate establishment. White pointed out that the president of the teachers union had sat on Cuomo’s commission to privatize public education, which called for slashing student transportation costs.

“Workers need an organization to unite and struggle,” said White. “But they need an organization that the members control democratically and that fights for their needs, not the needs of the top union officials and the corporate and political interests they serve. You are taking an important step forward today by organizing this meeting. Your decisions will be followed by workers throughout this city, across the country and around the world who are looking for a way forward too.”

Answering the intimidation and red-baiting by the union, White said, “We are proud to be socialists because that means fighting for social equality and placing the social rights of working people before the corporate profits of the billionaires... We say the working class must take political power in our own hands, establish a workers government that is a genuine democracy, and

break the stranglehold of the banks and the Bloomborgs of this world.”

A number of workers participated in the discussion that followed, some asking what would happen to them when their companies’ bids were not renewed and others wanting to know how they could keep the union “from selling us out in the future.”

“We all know that we got dumped by our own union,” one bus driver said. He went on to make a call for unity. “It doesn’t matter if you are Haitian, if you are Italian or if you are American,” he said. “The rich people’s table doesn’t have no race on it, it’s for the rich people.”

A worker from the Ralph Avenue bus yard in Brooklyn began by saying, “We are aware that the union violated us. They violated us because we were not informed properly... We didn’t have one single union meeting.”

The worker recounted how during the strike the union had instructed pickets at Ralph Ave. to go to City Hall for a demonstration. When they arrived, they found that there was no protest. They then learned that union officials had gotten them off the picket line after the company had informed them that it was going to interview scab replacement workers that day and “didn’t want to disturb the new applicants.”

“They told them to get us out, and they did it,” she said.

A worker employed at the Hoyt bus company said that workers had been left isolated on picket lines. “When I stood in front of the yard, when I was crying, when I was screaming, no one saw me.” She called for those present to “stay together...be strong together.” She said that she didn’t know what would happen after June. “The company is gone. I don’t even know if we will be on a master list.”

Another worker condemned the union for refusing to hold its one major demonstration on a weekday, when it could have disrupted traffic and gained far wider participation and visibility. The union, he said, “did not want to do anything to upset the millionaires and the billionaires going by Wall Street.”

At the end of the discussion, a vote was taken to form a committee to maintain communication between workers at different garages and stay united for the future struggle against layoffs and wage cuts.



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