

One month after strike

New York school bus drivers face new threats

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In the month since the betrayal of their strike by the ATU, school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics have returned to a dire situation. Kept in the dark about their own futures, the past four weeks have brought retributions, threats, and, while no full tally is available, scores if not hundreds of layoffs or firings. Thousands more await a similar fate at the end of the school year when new busing contracts for over 1,100 routes take effect.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who just this past year added another billion dollars to his fortune, took on the supposed out-of-control costs of school busing by attacking workers making on average \$35,000 a year. Bloomberg identified bus drivers as a relatively easy target: a smaller section of workers not directly employed by the city, represented by a union with a history of corruption, and with ample opportunities to hire scab labor. The success of the city in breaking the strike paves the way for similar attacks on other sections of workers, notably teachers and transit workers, who have been working without contracts, respectively, for nearly two-and-a-half years and for over one year.

The school bus companies are making clear that they will accept nothing less than drastic cuts to wages and benefits. At least two bus companies, Consolidated and Atlantic, sent letters to their employees threatening that they “will no longer have the guarantee of working, let alone keeping the same, or even slightly lower wages or benefits.”

The letters explain that companies with Employee Protection Provisions (EPP) in their contracts had no chance of winning bids. “Our company bid on all 1,117 routes, keeping your present wages and benefits in mind,” the Consolidated letter read. “However after recent bids for work, we have failed to get even one

route... Out of 67 bids, we finished in the highest percentage, finishing last, or next to last in every category.”

While the Department of Education has not yet announced which companies will be awarded contracts, it has published the rates and annual costs proposed by all bidders. The tabulation reveals what is in store for bus workers. The lowest bidders offered rates that can only translate into poverty level wages with little or no benefits. For example, the reimbursement rate for providing matrons on the bus routes was generally under \$100 per day. After subtracting a presumably substantial portion for overhead expenses and company profit, little is left to bring wages above minimum wage.

The contractors are counting on the continued treachery of ATU Local 1181. Union officials are back at the table with companies, negotiating a deal behind the backs of workers that will keep the companies competitive and preserve the union’s dues, regardless of the impact on workers. The union cancelled its regular monthly meeting, fearing opposition from workers, and has informed members that it will send out a “letter” to give them updates.

Meanwhile, the companies that hold existing contracts with the EPP through 2015 have taken legal action to allow them to slash wages. The petition submitted by Staten Island Bus Company, Lonero Transit and Pioneer Transportation explains, “For any pupil transportation contractor, labor costs are by far the most significant variable of a given contractor’s revenues. The other costs facing a typical contractor, such as buses, fuel and property, are generally priced at market rates and these do not offer significant competitive pricing opportunities.”

Even if unsuccessful in court, the companies have

other means of driving down wages. Often the owners have multiple bus companies, allowing them to close up one shop and switch operations to another. One Atlantic driver, referring to the letter he received, commented, “The company is lying to us. They are going to get out of this and get their top pay. And they will get rid of us. They are going to shut down the company, and hire new drivers. I used to work for Varsity and they did the same thing. They will do anything to pocket the money.”

There is discussion that Atlantic, the largest contractor, will simply lay off all of its workers and force them to reapply for their jobs and substandard wages and benefits. It is also possible that a major company like First Student—which only employs part-time workers—could acquire Atlantic and offer even lower bids.

Drivers expect that the companies will go after their Christmas and Easter bonuses, force them to pay higher contributions for health care, and also go after pensions.

Anger at the betrayal of the union is widespread. As one driver explained, “There is not a single driver or matron happy with the way the union handled the situation during the strike. To most of us, everything was planned between Bloomberg and the union representatives.” Another remarked, “What has the union done for me except take its dues from my check? What we have to have is a group, not for the union and not for the company, but for ourselves, the workers.”

Meanwhile, workers told the WSWS of retaliation they’ve experienced since returning. One driver said, “After the strike everything has changed dramatically. The company is treating us in a very different way. Sometimes I feel like they are just retaliating because of the strike. In my company, 67 people got fired, and replaced with new people who don’t even know how to do the job. I heard one of the new drivers saying that he is getting paid \$10.50 an hour, which is really insane for the type of work that we do.”

The driver also reported being targeted by city inspectors. “The Department of Education is also acting very weird. They are showing up in unusual places to do inspections, and giving us violations for minor defects, violations that come out of our pockets. For example the inspector was complaining about the seats having too much tape, tape that the company uses to fix the holes on the seats. Usually you get a violation if

they find holes on any seat, but this time they were complaining about a lot of tape on the seats. So what do we do then?”



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