School bus drivers face legacy of toxic pollution

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Among the most devastating outcomes of the betrayal of the New York City school bus strike is the prospect that bus workers may soon lose their health coverage.

For over 30 years, the guarantees inserted into city contracts with bus companies ensured that drivers, matrons and mechanics were able to maintain their wages and benefits, including health insurance, regardless of which company won contracts. Five years into the economic crisis, Mayor Michael Bloomberg launched an offensive against school bus workers, removing these protections from the city's request for bids.

With the defeat of the strike, health coverage for nearly 9,000 school bus workers is now in jeopardy, as companies scramble to cut costs and offer up the lowest bids. Meanwhile, access to affordable coverage is literally a matter of life and death for these workers, whose occupation puts them at greater risk of developing life-threatening illnesses.

In New York City, as elsewhere, essentially the entire fleet of buses operating on the 7,700 routes is powered by diesel engines. While diesels are known for their durability and efficiency, uncontrolled emissions contain a toxic stew of pollution known to cause severe respiratory and cardiovascular effects.

The chief health concern arises from the inhalation of tiny soot particles known as particulate matter. This microscopic particulate matter, a fraction of the width of a human hair, can become lodged in the lungs and, if small enough, penetrate the cardiovascular system and accumulate in the heart and other organs. Scientists have linked exposure to diesel particulate matter to reduced lung function, asthma, heart attacks, cancer, and ultimately death.

Researchers have long known about the potential impacts of diesel emissions. As early as 1988, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health declared it a potential occupational carcinogen. In the intervening 25 years, the body of research has piled up, leaving little doubt about the deadly effects of uncontrolled diesel fumes.

Last year the International Agency for Research on Cancer, a body of the World Health Organization, upgraded diesel exhaust to the highest class of carcinogens, on a par with tobacco smoke and asbestos. Among the most influential research leading to this conclusion were studies of occupations with high exposure to particulate matter, including rail yard workers, truckers, and underground miners.

The latter study is particularly noteworthy for the lengths to which industry went to try and prevent it, in the first instance, from ever taking place, and when that failed, to suppress the results. The study actually began in 1992, was completed in 1997, yet for 15 years a group of mining interests managed to keep the findings under wraps through lawsuits and Congressional pressure. Not until last year did a federal judge finally order the release of the study, which found lung cancer of heavily exposed workers five times the rate of workers in the lowest exposure group.

Bus workers, not to mention the children they transport, are similarly exposed to elevated levels of diesel exhaust. This has been verified in a number of studies, including one in 2008 in Washington State, which measured diesel particulate matter concentrations aboard school buses. The study found average levels four times higher than ambient air and two times higher than the roadside concentrations.

Around the world, an estimated 22,000 deaths each year are attributable to risks from diesel exhaust exposure on the job, according to the World Health Organization's Global Burden of Disease Study.

These deaths are entirely avoidable. Technology exists to virtually eliminate diesel particulate matter emissions from buses and other diesel sources. Catalyzed filters, when combined with diesel fuel low in sulfur, can reduce emissions by 99 percent compared to uncontrolled levels. This technology has been effectively required on all new trucks and buses sold since 2007. Nonetheless, approximately 11 million diesel engines continue to operate throughout the country without advanced controls, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

In New York City, the Bloomberg Administration has touted a mandatory retrofit law that is supposed to require best available technology on existing diesel buses. However, a large majority of buses in operation still lack diesel particulate filters, the most advanced form of controls. According to the latest compliance report, from last year, of the 2,188 full-sized school buses inventoried, only 752 met the most stringent standard. Smaller school buses were exempt from the mandatory tailpipe controls, though requirements were added later to control emissions from the engine crankcase. Fumes from both the crankcase and tailpipe find their way into the bus cabin, putting drivers and students at risk. Pollution reduction devices on both ends are necessary to minimize the harm.

This state of affairs is likely to persist another ten years, when city law finally requires all school buses to be 2007 models or newer. A reprieve in the distant future is little consolation to the current workforce, which is composed largely of veteran drivers who have already sacrificed their health by enduring decades of exposure to toxic fumes.

The WSWS spoke with school bus workers about health problems related to their work.

Marc said, “Most workers don’t have a chance to enjoy their retirement. They die of cancer or other diseases caused by the diesel fumes. I had a coworker who passed away four or five years ago of cancer. A lot of workers get sick especially in the cold weather, but they have to go to work anyway. There is more diesel smoke when the bus doesn’t have a chance to warm up. It takes a long time for the older busses to warm up. But we can’t wait; we just have to get into the buses and go.”

Another bus worker, Laura, also expressed concern about the effects of diesel exhaust. “I have always said that breathing in all the exhaust in our yards is not healthy for us. This is something to think about. Ironically, I am having breathing problems and my doctor said just last week that I should see a lung specialist!”

The poor state of the buses affects workers in other ways as well. According to Renee, “It’s not only the horrible fumes we breathe in on a daily basis, but the conditions of the buses as well. The drivers’ seats on some of the buses are so bad you can’t even sit on them. Some of them are held together with tape and the glue has melted, sticking to you. They have no springs or shocks, and when you hit a bump you feel like your insides are falling out. Some days I go home and my back and female organs hurt so bad I can barely sit.

“We suffer from severe back problems, asthma, and many times internal bleeding. High blood pressure is another major problem. The job is so stressful just on a day-to-day basis; some days I come home and can’t even face my family because I don’t want to take it out on them. Some buses have on heat or air and pure black exhaust so you cannot open the window. These conditions not only affect us but the kids as well.”

A driver with two decades of experience reported to the WSWS that, “There aren’t many bus drivers or matrons who don’t have problems with their backs. I for one have suffered for years with back ailments. I’ve had one surgery, which didn’t help me at all.

“Another problem is lung cancer. A lot of my co-workers have died from lung cancer and a lot have had surgery. I have had one cancer of the lung surgery in January 2010, and it has returned. The buses are left running in the yards. It isn’t as bad now because some drivers are park outs. Years ago when everyone had to go to the yard to get their bus the fumes would choke you.”