Contractors impose sweeping givebacks after defeat of New York City school bus strike

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The payoff for the betrayal of the strike by New York City school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics last month has quickly emerged in the form of an ultimatum from the school bus operators that will impose huge givebacks in wages and benefits for the 9,000 workers.

The companies are claiming an impasse in negotiations and are imposing concessions, some of which are taking effect immediately. Pay will be cut by 7.5 percent as of April 15. In addition, workers will no longer be paid for the weeklong Easter and Christmas breaks, meaning that they will lose pay for next week. They will also be forced to pay higher health insurance premiums.

This will mean a cut in pay for the highest paid drivers from $50,000 to $40,000 a year, and for matrons—many who are single mothers—from $28,000 to $20,000. This will mean poverty for workers in New York City, one of the most expensive cities in the world where annual rent payments can easily chew up $15,000.

Workers who are laid off with the expiration of contracts between an operator and the city's Department of Education will no longer be entitled to be placed on the Master List, the citywide seniority list that gave workers the right to be hired at their existing wages at companies winning new bids. Workers who move to another company will be forced to accept the wages and benefits at that firm. This is in line with the demand of the administration of New York mayor Michael Bloomberg, whose unilateral elimination of the Employee Protection Provision that had been in place for decades helped provoke the strike.

Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181, which worked to strangle the month-long walkout that began in January and then simply called off the strike without even bothering to take a vote of the membership, now says it has filed an unfair labor practice charge seeking an injunction to prevent the concessions from being imposed. At the same time Local 1181 President Michael Cordiello has announced a union meeting for April 4.

In a letter to the membership, Cordiello adds insult to injury. "These are trying times, unemployment levels remain high…," Cordiello—who makes $245,000 a year—informs the workers, as if they were unaware of this fact. In an effort to demonstrate the futility of any further resistance, he goes on to claim that union auditors have examined the books of some of the companies and verified that they are losing money.

Finally, after declaring that "Mayor Bloomberg is leaving this city in shambles," he comes to the main point: this is an election year, and workers must place their faith in the big business politicians of the Democratic Party who are hoping to succeed Bloomberg. Cordiello appends a copy of the February 14 letter signed by five mayoral aspirants, promising, "if elected, to revisit the school bus transportation system and contracts and take effective action to insure that the important job security, wages and benefits of your members are protected within the bidding process while at the same time are fiscally responsible for taxpayers."

This pledge is not worth the paper it is written on. The Democratic politicians uphold the interests of Wall Street. When they speak of "fiscal responsibility" they are signaling to the financial and corporate establishment that they will use the services of the unions to negotiate a deal that makes workers pay for the crisis.

The Democrats, like the Republicans, have always been loyal defenders of big business, but today, especially in the wake of the financial collapse and

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depression conditions, they are demanding endless austerity, meaning the ripping up of the living standards and social conditions of the working class. The devastating concessions facing the school bus workers will be used to argue for similar attacks everywhere else.

There are countless proofs of the true role of the Democrats, starting with the White House, which bailed out the banks but not the homeowners facing foreclosure. Obama boasts of an auto industry "revived" at the expense of workers now earning $14 an hour. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo imposed wage freezes on state workers last year, and Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel went straight from his White House job to attacking public school teachers.

Cordiello and the rest of the union bureaucracy play a crucial role in carrying out these attacks. These policies are not mistakes but conscious betrayals carried out by officials who negotiate on their own behalf, not that of their members.

Cordiello has indicated the workers can vote to resume the strike, but this is more a threat against the workers than the contractors. After more than a month living on nothing but starvation level strike benefits from the ATU, workers have been economically shattered and they know any strike action that remains under the control of the union is doomed.

When the walkout began two months ago, Cordiello worked alongside United Federation of Teachers president Michael Mulgrew and transit union chief John Samuelsen to see that the drivers and matrons remained isolated.

They feared more than anything a united struggle of all city workers. They were all the more determined to strangle the strike because not a single bargaining unit among city workers is working under a negotiated contract. The teachers contract expired in October 2009 and they are now in their fourth year without an agreement. The contract for municipal employees represented by District 37 of AFSCME ended in March 2010. Transit workers have been working without a contract since January 2012.

It is the rank and file school bus workers, transit workers, teachers and others who must lead this struggle, independent of and in opposition to the unions and their alliance with the Democrats.

The recent formation of a rank and file committee by the school bus workers to continue the fight for their jobs and basic rights is an important first step.

The political issues are now more crucial than ever, however. It is not a matter of trusting the unions, the Democrats or the courts, of hoping for mercy from the representatives of big business, but of breaking from them and uniting the whole working class, the vast majority, against this crisis-ridden system.

The unions and their Democratic allies defend a system that demands that the clock be turned back and that workers give up everything they have won in the past century and more of struggle. In the case of the school bus workers, the weapon of choice is "competitive bidding." With other New York City workers, stalemated contract negotiations go on for years while new means of attacking jobs and living standards are developed. In the case of Detroit, the attack could not be clearer. The façade of elections has been dispensed with and an emergency manager has been appointed whose job is to rip up existing contracts and impose the full cost of the crisis on the working class.

A social explosion is building up in New York, around the US and around the world. What is needed above all is a new leadership in the working class, guiding these struggles and fighting for the socialist reorganization of society so that jobs, wages, pensions and all basic social rights can be defended and made a reality for all.

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