

New York City school bus drivers, escorts denounce contractors' "final" offer

Our reporters
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Several thousand school bus drivers and escorts from around New York City attended a meeting after private bus contractors imposed their "best and final offer," which slashes wages and benefits and eliminates any semblance of job security. Workers spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the betrayal of their month-long strike by the Amalgamated Transit Union and the issues in their struggle.

Gerald, who has worked for 14 years first for Varsity and now Pioneer, explained his anger at the union before going in to the meeting. "They are not selling us out here tonight because they sold us out already. During the strike they asked Mayor Bloomberg: PLEASE put them back to work. Why get on the knees to him? At the Sunday rally called by the union, all the politicians and the media were conspiring against us.

"The union has created the problem. The union used to get something from the companies. But now they have nothing to offer. They started to give \$14 an hour to the new workers, less than what we were getting, and now they want to give all the workers \$14. When I started in 1999, the company and union kept me around for one year as a casual while I paid dues but they did not put me in the union. Some workers were kept around two, three years as casuals. Who gets the profit? The company and the union.

"They say this is a democracy but how come the union and the country won't let you express yourself? In this meeting, they won't let you talk. In this government there are only two parties. And they are sleeping in the same bed. What is the difference between a quarter and 25 cents?"

Another bus driver told the WSWs, "If you don't get everybody together and organized, the fight is lost. You still had buses rolling during the strike. Who's behind the school closings now? The Mayor does that, too.

There is money for the schools and the buses. They are full of crap when they say there isn't." Yves has been a driver for 11 years. He said, "The contract they are offering us will force us to take a 7.5 percent pay cut. It will reduce our hours from 8 to 5 hours a day. It will force us to pay four times the medical co-payment on our health insurance as we pay now. What more can they take away from us?

"I think the Board of Education is trying to save money. The bus companies are trying to save money, and they are cutting us at the bottom to the bone.

"It is a risky and scary situation for all of us. It is expensive to live in New York City, and when they take this, we cannot meet our cost of living expenses. Most of drivers have been working ten or twenty years. How can we pay our mortgages? How can we keep our kids in school? Why are they treating us this way?

"We don't want to go on strike again, but if we have to we will. If the union tells us to go out we will. But we are concerned whether the union is defending us. We are worried whether they are duping us. If they are just pretending like they are defending us, we are in trouble.

"The companies gave out applications to people who can replace us during the strike. What they did to us this week was give us a paper to write down all the left and right turns on our routes. They want us to map out our routes turn by turn so replacement drivers can drive the route if we go on strike.

"The mayor is a filthy rich man with \$26 billion. Bloomberg buys everything within the city, including the news. He doesn't care about us or anybody else. He wanted a third term because he had unfinished work to do in the city. He is attacking the teachers, the MTA transit workers and us. That is the work he is doing. And he probably has the health care workers in 1199

next on his list.

“Taking our job security and our wages is something Giuliani and Dinkins tried to do before Bloomberg. They are all politicians, Schumer, Gillibrand, all of them. They are all the same to me. They are all for the rich and the corporations. It doesn’t matter which party they are from.”

Another worker, Ines, said, “This is really a sad situation. The union put us on strike. Then we don’t get our jobs back. I have been in the union for 18 years and they have never done anything for us. I have no medical benefits. I have nothing.”

Connie added, “I’m 50 years old and have worked in this job for 28 years. This is terrible. They are taking everything from us. Vacation pay. Christmas pay. Easter pay. Everything. The unions just don’t care. We are waiting and waiting for them to do something and nothing ever happens.”

Two workers, Karen and Barbara from Hoyt Transportation, also stopped, saying the company has already sent out 300 termination bonuses because the company was underbid by a low-cost contractor after Bloomberg eliminated job and wage protections for workers. Karen said, “We are all going to lose our jobs on June 27 when the school year ends. It’s horrible what they are doing, taking our pay and our livelihoods away. All the politicians are for the rich.”

“I’ve got 16 years in the industry and they want to take away everything,” another worker said. “I’m 60 years old—where am I going to get another job that pays a decent wage? You can’t live in this city on the kind of pay the contractors want, not with the cost of apartments, food, car insurance and everything else. During the strike we learned more from the parents than we did from the union.”

Charlie, another veteran driver said, “The way things are now everything is going in the toilet. How are people supposed to live on less than \$600 a week in New York City? People would rather be on unemployment but now the government is cutting the checks by 10 percent. All of these politicians tell you what you want to hear to get elected.

“The contractors and the city really want to turn school bus driving into a part-time gig, something retired workers will do for \$400 to \$500 a week.

“We were left out in the cold by the union during the strike. They have been taking our dues but people are

not happy. I’m a retired sanitation worker and I know if Bloomberg can do this to school bus drivers they are going to do it to teachers and the rest of the city workers.”



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