Rank-and-file committee points way forward for New York school bus workers

Jerry White
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Thousands of school bus drivers and escorts poured into a local union meeting in Queens, New York last Thursday, the first called by the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 since it betrayed the one-month strike by nearly 9.000 school bus workers in February.

Workers at the meeting were angry, denouncing union officials for opening the door to sweeping concessions now being demanded by private school bus contractors. After the union's capitulation to New York City's Mayor Michael Bloomberg—who eliminated job protections for school bus employees in place for more than three decades—the bus contractors unilaterally imposed their "best and final offer," which includes a 7.5 percent wage cut and sharp increases in medical expenses.

The cut would reduce the wages of top-paid bus drivers from $50,000 to $40,000 and for escorts from $28,000 to $20,000. The contractors have already cancelled pay for the Easter and Christmas school breaks and eliminated the Master List, which enabled laid-off school bus workers to follow their jobs if another company gained a city contract.

ATU Local 1181 President Michael Cordiello told workers nothing could be done outside of filing a lawsuit with the National Labor Relations Board and appealing to the Democratic candidates running to replace Bloomberg next year. By the time the next mayor takes office, thousands of bus workers will already be out of a job.

Cordiello broached the issue of calling another strike but this was more a threat to workers than to the contractors. This time, Cordiello said, the union would call a company-by-company strike, not an industry-wide walkout, guaranteeing even greater isolation and defeat of any workers who walked out.

To further intimidate workers, the ATU official listed the disastrous results of the last strike, without, of course, taking any responsibility. Four companies—Reliant, Jofaz, Rainbow and Tufaro—had laid off drivers and matrons after the strike, he said, and scores remained without work. Pink slips, he added, were going out to thousands of drivers whose city contracts expire in June. Admitting the bankruptcy of the union, he said, "Although the world is changing around us, we never expected the bus companies' best and final offer."

A worker's denunciation of Cordiello from the floor won a loud response from the audience and the union president immediately called on his security detail to remove this worker from the hall.

The most conscious opposition came from the Drivers and Escort Action Committee (DEAC), a rank-and-file committee that was formed after the sellout of the strike. In a leaflet addressed to workers attending the union meeting, the committee wrote, "If you feel outraged, reject the contractors' 'final offer' and the union's no choice decision and join other 1181 drivers and escorts in building an action committee."

The leaflet denounced the ATU's "worthless appeals" to the courts and Democratic mayoral candidates and said another strike led by the ATU would lead to an even greater disaster. "If we are to defend ourselves, we cannot leave the conduct of our struggle in the hands of ATU Local 1181. We need an organization independent of the ATU, controlled by us, the workers, and dedicated to advancing our own interests."

"Our allies are not big business politicians but the workers of New York City," it continued. "The mayor has used us as an example to attack teachers, close schools and force concessions on transit workers, firefighters, sanitation and other municipal workers. We

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say to all workers: Our struggles are the same! We must stand united!"

The leaflet concluded with a call for a rejection of the blackmail contract, the restoration of job and income protections and a citywide struggle to defend all workers.

An April 2 meeting of 50 rank-and-file drivers and escorts unanimously adopted a statement of principles for the committee after a wide-ranging discussion on the issues confronting school bus workers. This included the call for an end to the privatization of public education and running student transportation on the basis of public need, not private profit.

A veteran bus driver opened the event, saying: "The union and the contractors are crying for each other. The union sent in auditors, who are basically reporting that the companies are losing money because of our salaries. No one is fighting for us. The only alternative the union is giving us is waiting for the politicians and for a court decision. They say accept the concessions or go on strike. The companies would love a strike to get rid of us. The union, the companies and the city are working together."

She concluded, "We can't leave the struggle in the hands of 1181. We have to call on other workers, and conduct an independent struggle. The union defends the system and the Democrats. We have to fight for ourselves. They want to turn the clock backwards 30 years and take everything away from us."

A driver with 24 years service said, "There is a lot of money in this country. We the working class paid for the bank bailout and now we are being exploited for the profits of the investors. Atlantic Express is a publicly traded company and they will do everything to boost the returns to their shareholders. They don't care where it comes from. School bus drivers, city transit workers, all workers are being sold out to investors who drive Lamborghini sports cars and live in luxury."

"The union is working for themselves, not for us," another driver from Atlantic Express added, "The last strike wasn't a strike at all, it was a masquerade. They want to pay you for part-time work like the contract the ATU signed with First Student in Long Island. When you call the union delegate they say we have to 'compromise with the companies.' Many workers, he said, "want to stop paying union dues because the ATU is not working for us."

In the course of the discussion, workers debated the viability of filing class action lawsuits against the union, issuing petitions to remove Cordiello and replacing him with a "reform" candidate. These questions were addressed by speakers from the *World Socialist Web Site,* who had been invited to the meeting because during the strike the WSWS was the only publication that provided a voice for workers, warned them about the treachery of the ATU and the Democratic Party and encouraged workers to form rank-and-file committees.

A WSWS speaker explained that the nationally based unions in the US and throughout the world had been transformed by the globalization of capitalist production into direct instruments of the corporations and the state to suppress the class struggle and impose the dictates of the banks and big business.

He said a change at the top of the unions would not change their fundamental character, pointing to the experience of the New York City transit workers who threw out the leadership of the Transport Workers Union Local 100 and elected a "dissident" leader, Roger Toussaint, who betrayed them and has since been kicked upstairs to a higher-paying position in the TWU International union.

Addressing several comments from drivers about the confusion of their fellow drivers and escorts, another WSWS speaker said, "Our job is to lead, not adapt to confusion. Of course, there is confusion: the trade unions and the Democratic Party have suppressed the working class for decades. This is a historic meeting because workers are beginning to emerge as an independent force. The answer isn't trying to reform what are unreformable unions, but building new organizations to unite the entire working class and politically prepare for the immense struggles to come."

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