

Contractors, Bloomberg step up attack on New York City school bus workers

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The New York City Department of Education (DOE) announced last week the opening up of contracts for an additional 3,100 school bus routes without job security provisions that have protected employees for three decades. The contracts, effective in September 2014, could result in mass layoffs and the replacement of current drivers and escorts with part-time workers earning a fraction of the pay.

The previous round of competitive bids triggered a bitter strike of nearly 9,000 drivers, escorts and mechanics earlier this year. With the first contracts expiring in June, hundreds of drivers have already received layoff notices. Previously, these workers would have received preference for hiring by the company with the winning bid and would retain the same pay scale and benefits.

The new terms, however, free bus companies to offer lower bids by driving down salaries. Education Chancellor Dennis Walcott announced that the DOE expected to save a total of \$20 million each year for the first 1,100 routes bid out. Walcott also touted the unprecedented number of offers, including by 40 new companies. The primary variable in this ferocious competition for lowest bid is the compensation for bus workers. There is little doubt the vast majority of the supposed \$20 million in savings will come directly from the pockets of drivers and escorts.

In justifying the removal of employee protections, the Bloomberg Administration once again resorted to outright lies to make its case. The Department of Education, according to Chancellor Walcott's statement on April 26, "could not legally include job guarantees in the bids. Last year, the New York State Court of Appeals ruled that such a guarantee could not legally be included in DOE bus bids for Pre-K school bus services."

The WSWWS previously pointed out the cynicism of this claim, as Bloomberg successfully quashed proposed legislation that clarified its legality. In fact, in a recent filing, the mayor's own corporation council explicitly said the Court of Appeals ruling still allows for the employee protections in the contracts. The city attorneys argued this to defeat a lawsuit filed by three bus contractors, which said since the EPP (Employee Protection Plan) was illegal, it should be removed from remaining contracts that ran through 2014 and 2015.

If the Bloomberg administration feels it can get away with this, it is because it has the unstated support of the Democratic Party establishment in New York. None of the Democratic candidates for mayor have denounced the latest round of contract bids, which have gone out more than a year before they expire. By the end of the year, 4,200 of the city's 7,700 routes are on track to be awarded without employee protections. The remainder are not far behind.

The five major Democratic candidates for mayor signed a letter giving the union cover to shut down the strike, pledging only to "revisit" the job protections once elected, while at the same time ensuring the contracts are "fiscally responsible for taxpayers." By the time the phony pledge comes due, the next mayor is counting on there being nothing left to revisit.

The experience in cities and states all across the country, as well as at the federal level, shows the drive to gut public education, health care and other vital social services, and to decimate the living standards of public sector workers is a bipartisan affair.

Meanwhile, the bus companies have unilaterally imposed a draconian contract on their workforce, declaring negotiations at an impasse. Workers received their first paycheck under the new terms, cutting hourly wages by 7.5 percent, increasing health care premiums

and robbing workers of holiday pay and overtime pay. Already barely scraping by, the cuts have left workers scrambling to pay rents, car payments, medical bills and other necessities in one of the most expensive cities in the world. Many of those who are eligible are preparing for retirement. Others are seeking a second job to supplement their income.

Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181, understanding full well its very existence is at stake, has responded by appealing to the Obama administration and to the companies themselves. They are out to convince both of their willingness to negotiate everything away, as long as they keep a seat at the table. “As you are well aware, Local 1181’s goal has always been to reach an agreement that is negotiated in good faith and is acceptable to all sides,” an April 15 letter from 1181 president Michael Cordiello stated.

The letter went on, “Some employers have written to our members telling them what is best for their families. As their bargaining representative, that is our job.” The bureaucrats argue that the impoverishment of bus workers can be accomplished more easily with the help of the union, rather than by dispensing with them altogether.

A National Labor Relations Board ruling on the impasse declaration is expected this month. If the NLRB determines the companies and union are not at an impasse, it only means they have full confidence in the ATU to concede through negotiations every one of the companies’ demands. Last week the union announced companies had agreed to resume informal talks with a federal mediator.



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