

Walled Lake, Michigan school bus drivers hold sickout

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One-quarter of the bus drivers for the suburban Detroit area Walled Lake Consolidated School District (WLCSD) in Michigan called in sick Wednesday morning to protest the planned turnover of the school district's bus transportation services to a private contractor, Dean Transportation.

As 11,000 of the roughly 15,600 students that attend WLCSD rely on school buses for transportation, the district, which serves Walled Lake and eight other surrounding cities and townships, was forced to close for the day. All-day child care for those in before- and after-school child care programs was offered by the district, and advance placement testing was relocated.

According to a union representative, the decision of the drivers to call in sick was made independently. The union made no further comment on the sickout.

In an attempt to vilify the bus drivers, WLCSD superintendent Kenneth Gutman stated, "Our kids will not be used as pawns." This is similar to what was done during the New York City school bus strike, when billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg accused striking school bus drivers of attacking the children, when in fact it was his administration carrying out massive attacks on public education in the city.

The sickout was in response to the Walled Lake School Board of Education unanimously voting in favor of opening a contract with Dean Transportation. Gutman says that privatizing the school buses will save the district more than \$1.4 million annually over the next three years, what he says is a necessary step to reduce the school district's \$10 million budget deficit. The district recently settled a contract with its 900 teachers, cutting their budget by \$2 million, another part of this process.

Bids to privatize transportation were requested in February and reviewed over a 30-day period. Then, on

April 22, WLCSD gave the transportation workers 10 days to come up with almost \$1.5 million in concessions, or face privatization.

The privatization would force immediate layoffs for the more than 100 bus drivers and paraprofessionals that ride with children, who all work only part-time and currently only make an average of \$18,000 a year. While the district has indicated that Dean will rehire 75 percent of the current drivers, it is not guaranteed. Moreover, while the district has told drivers that the pay, benefits and seniority of rehires will be protected, this is an unsubstantiated promise.

One requirement for being rehired is that the current WLCSD employees be in "good standing" with the district. When local news asked WLCSD spokesperson Judy Evola whether the sickout would be held against those drivers, Evola dodged the question saying that, "We will determine that at a later date."

It is also unclear as to whether Dean will bring in more drivers to the district or only keep 75 percent of the workers around, adding stress to the drivers' situation.

The district has in addition stated that the same safety standards that have been in force for WLCSD Transportation will be upheld by Dean.

Whatever the contract, both the school district and Dean Transportation will benefit. WLCSD will no longer be responsible for workers' compensation, which has a five-year average of \$107,000, and will no longer have legacy costs. Dean will be able to operate the buses, which will still be owned, fueled and purchased by WLCSD. The district would pay \$800,000 for new buses and \$684,412 in fuel costs.

This is the second time that Walled Lake has considered privatizing its school buses. According to Ann Ridge, the president of the Walled Lake

Transportation Association, three years ago, the district considered privatization but stopped after the transportation department took \$5 million in concessions over three years. Employees took a 10 percent pay cut and pay 20 percent more in insurance premiums.

There is also no discussion as to whether the current paraprofessionals that ride with mentally disabled children will remain with their current charges, or even if the paraprofessionals will remain at all. One parent of such a student, Sharon Rogers, told the *Oakland Press*, “For me, it’s very important that I feel comfortable with who is driving her and who is taking care of her.... I’m concerned that when they outsource, they are going to get people who are making minimum wage, who haven’t driven before and who haven’t dealt with [mentally impaired children before].”

Comments by students on Twitter express outrage that the school district is privatizing the bus services: “So wait, we have the money to buy the teachers iPads but can’t pay our bus drivers who have always been here for us! Shame on you Walled Lake. They already took a huge budget cut 2 years ago! Why would you fire all these people! And bring in people no one wants here!”

Another commented, “I don’t even have a bus. They got rid of mine this year. So yeah it pisses me off that the bus drivers are getting fired for no reason.” Others felt camaraderie with drivers they had known for years. “I feel terrible for them because most of these drivers have been in this district driving us all around since we were in elementary school.”

Some students even suggested that “We should start a fund for all the bus drivers getting laid off”, and that “How about we do a student strike, and stand on the grounds of ‘we don’t go unless driven by our normal bus drivers.’”



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