

Hundreds of New York City Access-a-Ride workers lose their jobs

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17 May 2013

About 600 workers in a New York City call center responsible for dispatching vehicles for disabled passengers lost their jobs at the end of March when a new company won a contract with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority for dispatch services for Access-A-Ride, the paratransit service provided for the disabled. Only 63 of the 678 workers, all of whom were represented by Transport Workers Union Local 100, now have jobs with the new company, Global Contact Services (GCS).

The most senior workers were making about \$22 per hour working for the previous contractor, First Transit. Many were not offered jobs with the new company and, in any event, they felt that it would be impossible to live on the lower pay scales of \$11 to \$12.50 per hour that the new company is paying. They received layoff notices in December of last year.

Dozens of angry former Access-A-Ride workers picketed outside the union headquarters last month to denounce its refusal to defend their jobs. Local 100 issued a statement in response, declaring that "While a few of the picket[er]s hope to score some cheap political points, most of them are understandably angry at losing their jobs. However, their anger is misdirected."

The *Chief*, the civil service weekly newspaper in New York, quoted Majorie King, one of the workers who lost their jobs. With 14 years on the job, she was earning \$17.40 an hour. "We ... have been completely abandoned by our elected president, vice-president and top officers," she said. "Every attempt to reach these officers by phone, fax and group visits have been ignored and 678 members left abandoned for months."

The attack on the Access-A-Ride workers, coming only a month after the betrayal of striking school bus drivers, escorts and mechanics in New York, illustrates

the role of the trade unions as accomplices in the destruction of jobs and living standards. The school bus workers had waged a determined month-long strike to defend the Employee Protection Plan (EPP), which had guaranteed that they would keep their seniority and jobs in cases where new bids resulted in new employers. The Bloomberg administration insisted on ripping up this job security, which the workers had fought for and had worked under for more than three decades.

After a month on the picket lines, the school bus workers were sent back to work when Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 abruptly surrendered and called off the strike. As a result, hundreds of drivers have already received layoff notices and the NYC Department of Education has just announced that 16 school bus companies have won contracts for about 18,000 students with disabilities, without the job protection guarantee for the workers.

During the school bus strike, assorted city unions made worthless declarations of solidarity while ensuring that the strikers remained isolated. Among the union bureaucrats pretending to back the ATU workers was John Samuelsen, president of Local 100 of the TWU, the same local representing the Access-A-Ride workers. Samuelsen appeared at a rally held near City Hall last February, while the officials of ATU Local 1181 were preparing their surrender. Local 100 even put a brief video on its web site showing some of its officials on a school bus picket line.

At the same time, the 35,000 bus and subway workers represented by Local 100 have been working without a contract for more than 16 months. Samuelsen and his organization do not in actuality represent the interests of their members, but rather those of the financial and political establishment, whether under Bloomberg or

his successor, Democrat or Republican. The latest attack on the call center dispatchers shows the role of the unions in keeping the working class divided—the school bus workers from city bus and subway workers, the bus and subway workers from the Access-A-Ride workers in the same union local—while sections are picked off one by one.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed some of the workers who kept their jobs with GCS, the new Access-A-Ride contractor.

Vincent told the WSWS, “I am an old First Transit worker. They told us the old contract for First Transit was up, and they basically gave us six months to be rehired with the new company or go on public assistance. Most of us who were brought back are making \$11.00 or \$12.50 an hour; \$12.50 is the maximum you can get. With First Transit, I was making \$15 an hour, but there were people with more seniority who were making \$22 an hour. Now \$12.50 is the maximum you can make.

“They took all the seniority away and there is no union. I am for getting things back to the way they used to be. I am for what is fair and right, but I went back [to work] because I have to feed my kids.

“Maybe 70 of us were retained, and those are the ones who wanted the jobs. They offered a lot of people the jobs, but many just thought it was unfair. They just said, ‘We are going to pay you this, and that is it.’ The new hires make \$11 an hour, and the old dispatch agents now make from \$12.00 to \$12.50.

“The TWU really didn’t do anything. I never heard anything from them. We had people go to a few meetings that they had without getting anything we could count on.

“The whole thing was really unfair. We were just so much in the dark about what was happening, it didn’t really hit us how this was going to affect us until things started to happen. Then things just happened so fast we really didn’t know what to think or do. The union didn’t do anything good.”

Nathan Murray has worked as an Access-A-Ride dispatcher for two years. “The problem with the transition is that we were not told whether we would be here or not,” he explained. “It was only days before GCS started here on April 1 that we found out whether we were hired. It was literally a week before they started they sent me an email with an offer. I thought it

was disrespectful. The company knew when they got the contract in October what wages they were going to pay and essentially who they were going to hire.

“The union didn’t tell us anything either. I thought, ‘What good is having a union if they don’t stand up for your job and don’t negotiate for anything like your wages or some kind of a severance, sick days or vacations?’

“I lost my medical coverage, and I was hospitalized two weeks ago. I was in two hospitals, and each one is costing me more than \$10,000. How am I going to pay this at \$12 an hour? Part of what happened was my blood pressure going up. It could have been related to what was happening with my job. Even with everything else, the union should have offered to extend our medical coverage or transition us in some way.

“The TWU said we were paying our union dues to get decent working conditions, wages and for fair representation. We have lost jobs and taken wage cuts here. Then there were the school bus drivers. On a scale of 1 to 10, I give the union a zero.”



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