

Thousands of New York City school bus workers face job cuts in June

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The New York City Department of Education's (DOE) Panel on Educational Policy (PEP) voted last week to hire school bus contractors for about 1,100 of its routes—one sixth of the total—that do not include long-standing job guarantees for experienced drivers and escorts. The move means that some 2,000 out of the 9,000 school bus employees will lose their jobs when school ends next month, with thousands more facing the same fate over the next two years.

The Employee Protection Provision (EPP), in place since the 1960s and defended in a bitter strike in 1979, allowed drivers, escorts and mechanics to follow their jobs and retain their current wages and benefits even if the city awarded bus routes to another contractor.

School bus workers conducted a month-long strike between January 15 and February 15 to defend the EPP, after Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced the DOE would award routes to the lowest bidders and ended the requirement that contracts include the EPP. The strike was betrayed by Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 and other city unions, which isolated the struggle and ended the walkout on Bloomberg's terms.

Now thousands of drivers and escorts will lose their jobs or be forced to accept sub-standard wages on top of wage and overtime cuts that have been unilaterally imposed by the bus companies since the union ended the strike without even reaching a new labor agreement. Some companies are reportedly advertising for van drivers who are paid as little as \$11.50 an hour. Before the strike, the average income of bus workers in New York City was about \$34,000 a year with the top pay capped at around \$52,000 a year.

It is likely that most bus workers will not be hired by the new contractors and will be replaced by lower paid drivers and escorts. The new hires will have little experience or training in meeting the complex needs of

children with a wide range of disabilities.

Drivers and escorts at a number of bus companies, including most at Logan Bus Company, some at Lorissa Bus Service, and some at Grandpa and Bobby's Bus Company, have already received letters telling them their runs are being taken away by lower bidding companies.

During the strike workers showed enormous determination and sacrifice, subsisting on as little as \$150 a week in strike pay in the most expensive city in the United States, and picketing in windy and isolated bus barns in sub-zero winter weather for hours each day.

In spite of this, the vast majority of the strikers were ready to escalate their struggle. Workers organized spontaneous demonstrations, and sought to approach other workers, particularly teachers, about the issues in the strike.

Many city workers understood instinctively that the attack on school bus workers by the city's multibillionaire mayor was only a test run for a broader assault on the working population of New York City.

There was nothing more that the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 and the New York City unions feared and opposed more than a unified struggle of the working class that would upset their deep seated relations with the city's corporate and political establishment. Top officials from the American Federation of Teachers union, for example, sit on Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo's school "reform" committee, which explicitly recommended cutting costs for student transportation and special education.

On February 15, the ATU called off the strike without even a membership meeting, instead ordering strikers back to work in a teleconference call. ATU officials

cited as justification for ending the walkout, a letter by five Democratic Party mayoral candidates promising to “revisit” the issue of job protections if they were elected.

So-called education reform—the privatization of public schools and drastic reductions in government education spending—is the mantra of Democrats, from Obama on down, as well as Republicans. Rather than opposing this attack, the unions have offered their services as partners in the destruction of public education, seeking only to preserve their dues income and other institutional interests.

The betrayal of the New York City school bus strike—like the sellout of the Chicago teachers strike that preceded it—has opened the floodgates for an escalation of school closings, attacks on school employees and the expansion of for-profit charter schools.

In the immediate aftermath of the school bus strike, hundreds of workers lost their jobs, and the bus companies unilaterally imposed concessions, including the loss of vacation pay for the Easter break and wage cuts averaging 7.5 percent. Drivers now only get paid overtime after they work 40 hours, as opposed to after ten hours in a single workday, effectively abolishing overtime payments for most school bus workers.

In a formal objection to the bids let out by the DOE for the 1,100 routes awarded on Thursday, a number of bus companies with existing contracts charged they were at a disadvantage because they still have to honor the EPP until their contracts run out in 2014 and 2015.

The result of a vote by the PEP was a foregone conclusion. The mayor appoints most members and the panel has closed thousands of public schools in recent years in spite of angry demonstrations by tens of thousands of parents, teachers and students.

Local 1181 organized an impotent protest stunt at the meeting, which involved only a handful of workers. It has also filed a toothless unfair labor practices complaint with the National Labor Relations Board over the unilateral wage cuts imposed by the companies. At the same time, ATU Local 1181 President Michael Cordiello has floated the idea of calling another strike, which is more of a threat against the workers themselves who know the union would only leave them isolated, subjected to being replaced by strikebreakers and sold out again.

After the PEP meeting, a driver from Staten Island with seven years of experience, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “They gave out jobs to people who are inexperienced. They bid out children’s safety to whoever pays the least amount of money. They put a price tag on the head of children.

“I drive autistic children every day. Are the new workers who get paid so much less going to do what I do? I blow their nose and calm them down. I have three of my own kids who are school age and one is autistic. How am I going to be able to take care of them at lower wages or with no job?”

The next day the union called a meeting, which, unsurprisingly, was sparsely attended. Workers who attended told the WSWS the union supplied no new information about the state of the contract negotiations, and had no response to the wage cutting by the companies except to reiterate that there was a complaint in front of the NLRB.

Shortly after the strike, workers who were opposed to the union sellout organized themselves into a rank-and-file committee—the Drivers and Escorts Action Committee—(DEAC) that began to organize independent of the ATU and sought to turn to the whole working class of the city to fight the attack on jobs and public education by both big business parties.

Throughout the strike, the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) provided a perspective for workers, insisting that a successful battle was possible only if workers took the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the unions and fought to develop a political movement of the working class against the profit system and the Democratic and Republican parties that defend it.

Drivers, escorts, and mechanics seeking to draw the lessons of the strike and its aftermath should contact the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact