# New York school bus workers denounce layoffs

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As the last day of classes approaches, bus drivers and attendants across the New York City public school system will say goodbye to their students. It's a familiar ritual, often tinged with sadness, given the bonds built up over the previous 10 months.

This year is different, however. For approximately 2,000 of the nearly 9,000 drivers and matrons, the goodbye is not for merely two months. It will likely be permanent, as bus companies lay off nearly a quarter of their workforce. And the sadness of year-end goodbyes will be overwhelmed by the devastation of job losses and financial ruin for thousands of families.

Adewole, a Queens bus driver with 12 years of experience summed up the situation: "These layoffs are a disaster and a shame. This will destroy families."

His fellow driver Carlos, whose salary supports three children and a wife who just underwent back surgery, explained: "It is hard to survive in New York City. I had my house for six years. The economy went down. I had to return my house to the bank. The government gave money to the banks. They wash their hands of what is happening. They just force the people to go on welfare. I worked 26 years in this country. I never went on welfare."

"The Board of Education and Bloomberg put people in the streets," Mirando, a 13 year veteran said. "This country has money. The city doesn't give the money. So some companies look to pay $10 per hour. They think they are smart. This could be civil war again."

The mass layoffs come as New York City issues new contracts for bus routes without longstanding job and wage guarantees for current workers. Existing contracts for approximately 1,100 routes expire at the end of this school year on June 26. The city is currently requesting bids for another 3,100 routes, forging ahead with its cost cutting following the isolation and betrayal of the month-long school bus workers strike by the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 last February.

As current contracts expire and companies seek to compete for the lowest bid on future contracts, some bus companies like Citywide, Rainbow and All-American have issued layoff notices to their entire workforce, offering to rehire drivers at a fraction of their previous wages. Luis, a driver in Astoria explained, "The pay is not just being cut down to $13 for some, but they want to hire for just $10 flat, and no overtime. The union can't do anything because they don't have a contract. It is not fair. I have been here for nine years. I am speechless when it comes to this kind of situation. You have a family, and the rent keeps going up."

Similarly, Logan Transportation sent dismissal letters to all of its employees at its Bronx yard. Rosie, a driver at Logan, explained, "Many older workers are leaving. The company wanted to get rid of them. Many other workers have transferred. I am happy for a friend who managed to get a job driving for Coca-Cola. But this has been discouraging for us as workers."

Even for those workers not facing layoffs this month, the transformed working conditions are leading to ruin. The bus companies, declaring negotiations are at an impasse, unilaterally imposed a new contract that cuts hourly wages, eliminates holiday pay and increases health costs, amounting in all to around a 20 percent pay cut.

The union appealed the impasse declaration to the National Labor Relations Board, arguing they are more than willing to continue negotiations with the companies. To the extent that the union is successful, it will be because they are able to convince the NLRB of their willingness to collaborate on the sought-after concessions. The case is set to go before an

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Administrative Law Judge for a hearing on July 9. By then, thousands already will have been laid off.

In the face of mass job losses and cuts, anger is mounting towards the well paid bureaucrats in ATU Local 1181. Workers in the Queens and Bronx bus yards denounced the union, which is completely subservient to the Democratic politicians, as "worthless" and "capable of saying anything." Mark, a Queens-based driver, commented, "The union sold out the people. We have no choice. We have no voice. Everybody gets laid off after the 26th."

Adewole, a driver from the same yard, added, "You go to these union meetings and it is a waste of time. The last union meeting had about 50 people. People are disgusted and disenchanted with the union." He continued, "The Democratic politicians told us to go back to work because they said that they would look at the contract [after the November election], but that could mean anything. The Democrats and Republicans are playing a game. They are working for the bosses."

The game continued earlier this month at a "heated" City Council committee hearing with schools chancellor Dennis Walcott. A few council members questioned Walcott, who refused to testify under oath, about the city's legal filings contradicting his statements during the strike about the legality of employee protections. The issue has always been a red herring, with the city lobbying the state not to clarify the issue in legislation prior to the strike.

Most remarkable, however, was the challenge to Walcott on the grounds there is no proof that eliminating employee protections would actually achieve any cost savings. This claim was echoed by Local 1181 president Michael Cordiello in testimony the following day.

This claim is ridiculous on its face, as if cutting bus workers salaries by up to two thirds will have no effect on the cost of contracts. Companies paying $10 an hour for drivers on a part time basis with little or no benefits will naturally be able to underbid any rival maintaining the previous pay rates.

More importantly, implicit in this argument is the acceptance of the lie that there is no funding for vital public services, that all the social gains of the past are justifiably on the chopping block, that the costs of maintaining public education and transportation services are all unacceptable drains on profit and can no longer be tolerated under conditions of an economic crisis.

The chair of the education committee and Democratic candidate for Manhattan borough president, Robert Jackson, spoke for everyone present at the committee meeting—the politicians and the union bureaucrats. "Let me be clear," he told Walcott in reference to the potential savings from bus contracts, which are directly extracted out of workers' pockets, "no one to my knowledge is opposed to saving money."

The WSWS and Socialist Equality Party has consistently warned against illusions in the Democratic Party and the union. As mass layoffs become a reality, it is more critical than ever to draw the lessons from the strike and its aftermath, to build a political movement of the working class independent from and in opposition to these forces. We urge school bus workers to contact the Socialist Equality Party.

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