

Boston school bus drivers take wildcat action

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Boston school bus drivers staged a wildcat job action Tuesday morning, sparked by anger over working conditions and the brutal management style of private transportation vendor Veolia, which signed a contract with the city this summer to transport Boston Public Schools students. Only about 30 of 650 buses that transport 33,000 students to Boston's public, private and parochial schools were on the road Tuesday, taking authorities and parents by surprise.

City politicians and the media viciously denounced the workers, claiming it was the drivers who were putting students at risk and threatening legal action to force them back to work. One commentator on the local NBC TV affiliate called for the bus drivers to be fired if they did not return to work in 48 hours, recalling the mass firing of the PATCO air traffic controllers by President Reagan in 1981.

The wildcat hit all four bus depots, and came in opposition to the leadership of United Steelworkers Local 8751, which represents the drivers. At the Readville bus yard, local USW official Dumond Louis, who spoke through a bullhorn calling on workers to go back to work in the afternoon, was greeted by boos and shouts of "No!" from assembled drivers.

A video posted on Masslive.com shows a heated exchange between a Local 8751 member and a USW official at one of the bus depots, with the worker denouncing the bureaucrat and shouting, "You work for me! I have kids to feed." As of midday Tuesday, Veolia had forced workers to leave the depots and locked the gates, with Boston Police guarding them.

USW District 4 Director John Shinn issued a statement Tuesday afternoon that read: "The USW does not condone the current action, or any violation of our collective bargaining agreement, and has instructed all members of Local 8751 to immediately cease this strike ... and resume work as soon as possible." Local 8751 officials did not respond to media phone calls or email

inquiries.

Democratic Mayor Thomas Menino, who is stepping down at the end of his term after 20 years, denounced the drivers. "This illegal work stoppage has to stop," he said at a City Hall news conference. "I want all these bus drivers back to work tomorrow morning." Workers are forbidden from striking by the contract signed in 2011 with First Student, the predecessor of Veolia.

The two contenders for Menino's position, both Democrats, similarly attacked the drivers. City Councilor John R. Connolly, a one-time Boston charter school teacher, said, "This is about safety first and foremost, and it is totally unacceptable that our children were put at risk this morning."

Massachusetts state Representative Martin J. Walsh, a former member of Laborers Local 223, stated, "The bus drivers have put our children in harm's way. This is an illegal action, causing a huge disruption, and I call on the bus drivers to return to work immediately."

Mayor Menino met with city officials to plan legal action to force the drivers back to work, and threatened that drivers would be held to account for their actions. Tuesday evening, a judge did not grant a request from the City of Boston and Veolia for an injunction to force a return to work. The mayor advised parents to make contingency plans for transportation Wednesday morning, although it was unclear whether the drivers would continue their action.

In an evening press conference, Menino denounced the drivers as "selfish" and said the city and Veolia would pursue all legal avenues against the school bus drivers, including monetary damages against the union and those who participated. A city official explained that the union had made it clear that they did not support the work stoppage, and that they had visited each bus depot in an effort to get the drivers to return to work.

But while the media and city authorities vilified the

drivers as a threat to the safety of city schoolchildren, bus drivers who spoke to the WSWs at the depot in Dorchester explained how it was the policies of the city and vendor Veolia that were endangering school children and the terms of the drivers' contract.

One driver said, "Things have not been right since this new company has been brought in." She added, "They treat us like crap, they try to play us against each other." Workers described how many workers' paychecks were inaccurate, and that reporting times for work were constantly changing.

The average Boston school bus driver has about 25 years' seniority. One worker with 38 years' experience said she wasn't upset so much about wages, but about the labor practices of Veolia. Another commented on vendor Veolia: "Because they're so powerful in their head with their finances, they think they can just walk over us. So they're violating the contract we have in place, the one they agreed to get the contract" with the city.

Drivers explained that workers were being victimized in particular for "abandoning children" when they dropped them off at bus stops, when in fact Boston Public Schools regulations call only for "corner to corner" service for students.

One driver said, "It's corner to corner. We don't know these kids' names. We pick them up at the corner and drop them off at the corner. That's our job. We leave that child, and then we're on the 6 o'clock news for abandonment of a child."

Another explained: "If you look on the Boston Public Schools web site, it's all clearly written there. It says it's the parents' responsibility to be at the spot with their child." But drivers were being suspended for this "every day," he said. One worker said the company told him he had to wait 45 minutes the other day for a parent. "The dispatcher told me I had to wait there," he said, or face disciplinary action.

Workers also explained how they constantly have radios that don't work, and that the buses are in disrepair. "But we still have to drive them," one said, "because we still have kids to pick up." Another added, "I heard a guy got suspended because he had no radio, so they couldn't call him on a situation—but he had no radio!"

A number of workers said their own children ride the school buses and that it was a lie to claim they were

unconcerned about the safety of students. Asked about Mayor Menino's comments and city efforts to force them back to work, one driver said, "The mayor is on his way out. The contract worked in his favor—he's a union-buster. They would like to get the higher seniority people out of the way because we know our rights."

Workers made clear that they had been forced by these conditions to take action. "We want to make a strong statement," one driver said. "What they don't seem to realize," he said, "is that we are a union. An injury to one is an injury to all. We can't allow them to do it to one worker and say, 'It's OK,' because you didn't do it to me. You might be next, or you might be next. And here's the thing. It's happened to more than one person so far, and today we're saying: We've had enough."

This same driver described the working conditions drivers face: "When you walk in that office it is almost like that movie *Minority Report*. You hear these messages, and it's like they're trying to program you. We know our jobs. But there are signs constantly telling us: 'Get your clipboard, get your key, get your monitor, proceed to the bus.' But excuse me, we've been doing this for years! What's with the subliminal messages? It's almost like a master-slave type of attitude."



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