

Boston school bus drivers end wildcat strike

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Most Boston school bus drivers returned to work Wednesday, following a one-day wildcat strike that shut down bus service for the city's 33,000 public, private and parochial schools. The work action, sparked by anger over the practices of private bus contractor Veolia Corp., was opposed by the drivers' union, United Steel Workers Local 8751, which tried to force workers back to work Tuesday morning.

Drivers have been incensed at Veolia management since it took over student transportation in the city in July. Grievances include discrepancies in workers' pay, poor notification of changes in work schedules, and a dictatorial management style that has resulted in numerous unwarranted suspensions of workers. Hundreds of drivers every week charge they are being shortchanged on their paychecks. Drivers also say buses, radio and other equipment are in a state of disrepair.

The city authorities and the media have vilified bus drivers for allegedly placing school children in danger and behaving "selfishly." Their union has sided with the city and management, with USW District 4 releasing a statement Tuesday afternoon reading in part, "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." They branded the wildcat illegal and advised the local to take their grievances to the National Labor Relations Board.

Dumond Louis, president of United Steelworkers Local 8751, told the *Boston Herald* that he called Boston Public Schools Transportation Director Carl Allen four times on Monday night warning him that a wildcat strike was possible but his calls were never returned.

"To tell you exactly what I told them, 'Tomorrow morning, we may have a big issue on our hands. We need to sit down, call the company and have the

company meet with us as soon as they can, so we could avoid the chaos that probably will happen tomorrow.'"

Louis and other USW officials tried to order workers back to work but were shouted down by rank-and-file drivers Tuesday. Louis told the *Herald* both local and international union leaders ordered the drivers back to work Wednesday. "But are they going to listen?" Louis said. "I hope they listen."

While school buses ran Wednesday on a nearly full schedule, drivers at one depot apparently tried to stop others from leaving the yard. In a press conference Wednesday afternoon, Boston Mayor Thomas Menino denounced the work stoppage, which he called "illegal." He said, "Most of the drivers are good people. It was led by a rogue element of the union and we're going to deal with that rogue element of the union."

In an interview with the *Boston Globe*, Menino aide Marie St. Fleur said the work stoppage was instigated by "a group of renegades who decided to violate the terms of the contract of every driver who came to work" on Tuesday. "That faction has caused intimidation and created disruption in the lives of families and children of this city," she railed.

According to John Dunlap, Boston's labor relations chief, USW leaders have assured Veolia there will be no further job actions. Drivers returned to the job on promises the union would be meeting with company officials on Wednesday in an effort to press the workers' demands. Steve Kirschbaum, chairman of the union's grievance committee, pushed for an end to the wildcat, welcoming the return of drivers as an act of good faith in advance of the union's meeting with management Wednesday.

Kirschbaum, a founding Local 8751 member with long-time connections to the pseudo-left Workers World Party, stated that Mayor Menino "was right. We do have a good contract." He peddled the claim that the

union represented workers and could persuade the company to listen to the drivers' grievances. "Veolia has no right to negate 38 years of collective bargaining," he said.

Union leaders arrived for the meeting in Quincy following Wednesday morning's bus run with a list of 16 demands to present to Veolia. These included "complete and total amnesty" for all its members involved in Tuesday's wildcat and withdrawal of a company letter, dated October 9, that threatened to discipline drivers. The union is also asking Veolia to cease using a GPS tracking system and software program—installed initially to route buses and help parents track their children's buses—to evaluate workers' performance and pay.

However, union and company officials never actually met face to face at the Quincy hotel. "Our lawyers are talking with their lawyers," union steward Jean Claude Toussaint told the *Globe*. The USW leaders and Veolia representatives left the meeting with no apparent resolution on any of the drivers' grievances.

The company and union are united in their opposition to the "rogue element" among the drivers that led to Tuesday's wildcat and are fearful the membership as a whole could again take action. City authorities, nervous over any repeat of Tuesday's walkout, have threatened to deal harshly with any future job actions, including with monetary penalties against the union and individual workers, or dismissals.



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