

Union reps suspended over Boston school bus drivers wildcat strike

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Two union leaders have been suspended in connection with the Boston school bus drivers wildcat strike that halted transportation Tuesday for 33,000 students at the city's public, private and parochial schools. Veolia Corp., the private company contracted to run the bus system, says additional drivers are under investigation.

Drivers returned to work Wednesday following promises from their union, the United Steel Workers (USW), and Veolia that they would meet to discuss the workers' grievances. The one-day work stoppage was sparked by anger over the practices of Veolia, which took over the contract for Boston Public Schools (BPS) transportation in July.

The workers' union, USW Local 8751, and USW District 4 actively opposed the strike, but were unable to stop it. The union sided openly with Veolia management and the city administration of Mayor Thomas Menino in branding the wildcat "illegal."

The school bus drivers are angered over discrepancies in workers' pay, changes in work schedules, and Veolia Corp.'s dictatorial management style. They want Veolia to stop using a GPS tracking system—and software initially installed to help parents track their children's bus routes—to evaluate workers' performance and pay. Hundreds of workers on a weekly basis charge Veolia is shortchanging them on their paychecks.

USW officials arrived for a meeting with Veolia at a Quincy hotel on Wednesday with a list of 16 demands. Number one on this list was "complete and total amnesty" for all union members involved in Tuesday's wildcat. Over the course of 11 hours, the union and company representatives never actually met face to face, but communicated through their lawyers who ferried back and forth between the two sides in separate

rooms.

The union announced Wednesday night that Veolia had placed two union leaders on leave, but did not identify them. The company also says that a total of seven bus drivers are being investigated in connection with Tuesday's wildcat. The majority of drivers reported to work Thursday with the union and management no closer to an agreement on the workers' grievances.

On Thursday morning, a small group of drivers tried unsuccessfully to block others from boarding their buses and leaving the Readville yard in Hyde Park, according to a BPS spokesman. Mid-morning, two union leaders showed up at the depot for a discussion with drivers. They had been reportedly ordered by Veolia not to show up at the yard, and were escorted off the premises by Boston police. Some of the drivers followed them and the group held an impromptu rally outside the depot gates.

One of those told to leave the Readville yard was Steve Kirschbaum, chairman of the union's grievance committee, with long-time connections to the pseudo-left Workers World Party. The day before he had urged a return to work, saying that Veolia could be convinced to listen to the drivers' grievances. Veolia spokeswoman Valerie Michael declined to say whether Kirschbaum was one of the two union leaders who had been placed on paid leave.

On Wednesday, officials in the Menino administration had fingered Kirschbaum and Local 8751 Vice President Steven Gillis as the instigators of Tuesday's strike. Menino aide Marie St. Fleur denounced wildcat strikers who taken a stand against Veolia to defend their rights. Insulting the drivers, she implied that the mostly immigrant workforce had been hoodwinked and bullied into striking.

“This was a group of renegades who decides to violate the terms of the contract of every driver who came to work on Tuesday,” St. Fleur said Wednesday in an interview with the *Boston Globe*. “That faction caused intimidation and created disruption in the lives of families and children of this city.”

St. Fleur, of Haitian descent, said that the majority of Haitian, Cape Verdean and Latino drivers were unfamiliar with labor relations in the US and the procedures for getting their grievances heard. In other words, they should keep quiet, listen to their union leaders and rely on the National Labor Relations Board to fight their battles.

With Veolia refusing at this point to accede to any of the school bus drivers’ demands, the situation remains tenuous and the possibility of a future job action is a distinct possibility. While USW officials continue to assure city authorities that the wildcat was a “mistake” that will not be repeated, city and BPS officials are advising parents to check daily on the status of school bus transportation. A notice on the BPS web site reads: “Unfortunately we do not have confidence that service will continue every day. Parents should continue to have alternate plans in place.”



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