

One month after the wildcat strike

Boston school bus drivers need new strategy to fight company attacks

Socialist Equality Party
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This statement was distributed to Boston, Massachusetts school bus drivers yesterday at a meeting of the United Steel Workers Local 8751.

More than one month after the wildcat strike of Boston school bus drivers, none of the grievances of workers against school bus contractor Veolia that led to the action have been addressed or resolved.

The one-day strike on October 8 provoked the ire of the entire political establishment. Democratic Mayor Thomas Menino denounced the “illegal work stoppage” and threatened the drivers with legal action, declaring, “We will not allow them to use our students as pawns.” The drivers’ action was also opposed by their own union, the United Steelworkers. USW District 4 Director John Shinn said in a statement the day the strike broke out: “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.”

These denunciations by Democratic Party politicians and union officials were quickly followed by the suspension by Veolia of five local officials: Steven Kirschbaum, Steve Gillis, Andre Francis, Garry Murchison and Richard Lynch. Lynch was subsequently reinstated, but the other four have been fired. The firings are aimed at intimidating the entire workforce, and a campaign for reinstatement of the four who remain fired is central to the ongoing struggle of bus drivers.

The Socialist Equality Party’s defense of Kirschbaum and the other local leaders against victimization in no way implies agreement with their politics. On the contrary, in order for the bus drivers to develop a struggle against the attacks of Veolia, it is necessary that workers know who are their friends and who are their enemies. While posing as defenders of the rank and file, Kirschbaum and the

other local union leaders play a key role in keeping workers tied to the USW and the Democratic Party establishment.

Kirschbaum is a long-time member of the Workers World Party. This organization consistently covers for the union bureaucracy and the Democrats, who are hostile to the interests of the working class. A founder of Local 8751, Kirschbaum was central to the negotiation of the present contract and its no-strike clause with Veolia’s predecessor, First Student. An article by Steve Gillis in *Workers World* published January 14, 2012, titled “Bus drivers’ union wins historic contract,” makes no mention of the no-strike clause that Veolia is now utilizing to victimize workers for the wildcat.

The contract states under Article 16, Section 1: “The Union agrees that there will be no strikes, stoppages of work, or slowdowns during the life of this Agreement.” Section 2 states that the company agrees not to conduct a lockout, and Section 3 states: “The Union agrees that in the event of any violation of Section 1 of this Article the Union will immediately order that such violation cease and that the work be fully resumed.”

Thus on October 8, the United Steelworkers—including the district director, Kirschbaum and other local leaders—told the drivers to end the strike and get back to work. The entire campaign of the USW now amounts to a legal appeal based on the claim that workers did not strike, but were locked out after demanding a meeting with Veolia to address their grievances.

In reality, what took place October 8 was a wildcat action that caught the entire political establishment—the union included—by surprise. When Local 8751 President Dumond Louis and other officials attempted to order workers back to work they were shouted down by drivers who said that the union, which was taking money out of

their pockets, had done nothing to defend them. Instead of defending the strikers and exposing their grievances to the public, the USW joined management and the mayor's denunciations of the drivers, paving the way for the victimizations that have now taken place.

While the drivers returned to work the next day, the significance of the wildcat strike cannot be buried. The dispute was a result of the systematic undermining of workers' rights by Veolia since taking over the contract in July. None of the issues confronting workers—pay discrepancies, changes to work schedules, dictatorial management styles—have been addressed.

Crucial political lessons must now be drawn if the fight is to be taken forward. Clear class lines have been drawn in this dispute. On the one side stand 700 workers determined to fight for their rights, allied with parents, students and working people throughout the city, and on the other stand not only Veolia, but the entire political establishment, Democrat and Republican, as well as the drivers' own union.

The struggle of the Boston school bus drivers is linked to that of workers across the country facing similar issues. School bus workers in New York City conducted a month-long strike early this year in defense of wages and job security. The strike was betrayed by Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 and other city unions, which isolated the struggle and ended the walkout on New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's terms.

Workers in Northern California faced similar issues last month when a four-day strike of 2,300 Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) workers was called off by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU). The unions accepted all of the basic demands of BART management, including concessions on pensions and health care and changes in work rules to further undermine working conditions.

Everywhere, the demands of the ruling class are the same. Under conditions of record inequality, workers are being told that they must give up everything. Wages and benefits must be slashed, and social services cut, in order to funnel ever greater sums into the stock market and finance the massive payouts to the corporate and financial elite.

The issues confronting Boston school bus drivers are not due simply to the ruthlessness of Veolia management. If Veolia were replaced tomorrow by another company, none of the drivers' grievances would be addressed or resolved in their favor. They would be still working under a contract that denies the right to strike, and they would

be still subject to dictatorial management. Any new company taking over the contract would seek to operate at the lowest cost and maximize its profits through the brutal exploitation of the workforce.

In order to defend its interests, the working class needs new organizations to mobilize its strength both industrially and politically. If the school bus drivers' fight is to be taken forward, it can only be done independently of the United Steelworkers union and the Democratic Party apparatus.

There is an urgent need for the building of a genuine rank-and-file committee of bus drivers to link their struggle with the struggles of workers throughout the city and across the country. The fight to defend bus workers must be connected to a campaign against the ongoing restructuring of the Boston Public Schools system, which is threatened with further school closures, privatizations and attacks on the jobs and working conditions of teachers and staff. Bus drivers, teachers, school workers and parents need to unite in a working class opposition to the attack on public education and workers' rights.

The defense of jobs and decent working conditions can be secured only through a struggle against the capitalist profit system and in defense of the social rights of the working class. This is what the Socialist Equality Party fights for. We urge bus drivers to contact us to discuss the program and perspective needed to take this struggle forward.

Contact the Socialist Equality Party at <http://socialequality.com/>



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