

Thousands more New York City school bus workers face layoffs

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Atlantic Express, one of the major companies providing yellow bus service for New York City school children, has announced that it will cease operations at the end of the year. This comes a month after the company had filed for bankruptcy and sent out provisional layoff notices to 5,500 employees in New York and other cities.

The closure announcement came last Friday, shortly after workers rejected a proposed contract that would have meant a significant cut in wages and benefits, as well as forfeiture of back pay was owed to them.

A company spokeswoman claimed that Atlantic could not meet demands placed on it for financing by Wells Fargo bank without the cuts in labor costs it had demanded. This is the third time that Atlantic Express has gone into bankruptcy. Approximately 2,000 school bus jobs will be lost. Other companies will now bid for Atlantic's routes based on rock bottom conditions for the workers.

The closure of Atlantic Express followed by less than a month plans announced by New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and city schools chancellor Dennis M. Walcott to put out for rebid contracts for an additional 4,100 school bus routes. This is on top of the 1,100 routes opened for bids earlier this year, which lead to a month-long strike by bus drivers and matrons (attendants). The strike was in response to the city's abrogation of the three-decades-long Employment Protection Provisions (EPP) which allowed workers to keep their jobs, pay, and benefits, whichever private company won the bus route contracts.

Workers' comments posted on the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1181's Facebook page after a membership meeting last Thursday stated that the local's president Michael Cordiello offered no response to the closure of Atlantic Express, merely

indicating that he had known the company was headed for bankruptcy.

Other bus companies have already closed and reopened under different names or used other tactics to break existing contracts and drive down their cost of labor under the new cut-throat environment created by the termination of the EPP.

Local 1181, the ATU and the New York City unions isolated and betrayed the workers, shutting down last winter's strike on the basis of an empty promise from the Democratic mayoral candidates to "revisit" the EPP after the election. In the meantime, contracts for the 1,100 routes were rebid without the EPP protections, allowing the bus companies to lay off workers and cut wages and benefits for those that remained.

It is estimated that approximately 2,000 school bus workers, out of a total of 8,900, have already lost their jobs. Workers report that the companies are eliminating pensions (substituting 401k), medical insurance, vacation and holiday pay, as well as drastically cutting wages.

The city now intends to initiate the same process for an additional 4,100 routes, awarding them to the companies with the lowest bids, meaning that many more workers will lose their jobs or suffer cuts in wages and benefits. Experienced workers are being replaced by cheaper novices, placing school children at risk.

In his announcement, Bloomberg boasted that the rebids would save the city between \$210 and \$410 million dollars over five years. These savings would be the direct result of pushing the drivers and matrons into poverty.

The union is promoting the idea that the city's Democratic mayor-elect Bill de Blasio, whom it supported in the election race, will abrogate the

contracts when he takes office in January. However, de Blasio has given no such assurances and refused to comment on the city's latest announcement.

The illusion peddled by the ATU that de Blasio will reverse Bloomberg's policies is belied by last year's Chicago teachers strike and the BART strike earlier this year in San Francisco, which proved that Democrats will carry out savage attacks on workers with the collaboration of the unions.

The devastating impact of the union's betrayal of the bus workers was illustrated in an article recently published in the New York Times. The piece, which reveals perhaps more than was intended, was published as part of the *Times*' "Neediest Cases Fund" holiday season charity drive. It highlights a 61-year-old school bus matron, Nicole Bouchotte, who is being reduced to poverty by the loss of her job due to the ending of the EPP.

Ms. Bouchotte, who had worked for Atlantic for nearly 20 years, was driven to rely on support from friends and charities in order to pay arrears on her rent. Her monthly pay had already been cut by \$210. The *Times* quotes here as saying, "If someone told me 10 years ago I'd be going someplace for charity, I'd say 'no!' Look at me now."

One would hardly guess from the phony sympathy served up by the *Times* that the newspaper was vociferous in support of New York City's billionaire mayor in his drive to break the bus drivers strike and destroy their wages and conditions. In an editorial during the walkout it cheered on Bloomberg's bid to end "a labor agreement that undermines competitive bidding," insisting that his administration to "hold its ground" against the low-paid school bus drivers. Having vilified the workers when they were fighting to defend their rights, the *Times* now upholds one of the victims of the policy it supported as a charity case to be pitied by its wealthy readers.

It is telling that one of the leading capitalist newspapers in the country feels able to present as an object of pity a bus worker whose previous modestly stable life is being destroyed by the rapacious drive of the capitalist system to extract every last ounce of profit from workers. The situation of this worker is a clear warning to other bus workers and the entire city labor force of what is to come. Furthermore, it indicates that the *Times* feels confident in the complete docility of the

ATU.

Bouchotte's situation is far from unique. The WSWS spoke with workers as they entered last week's union meeting. They spoke of increasingly difficult circumstances.

G. T., who has worked Rainbow Transit as a matron for 19 years said that, "Without EPP, we do not have jobs. This is what protects us.

"I do not have a job. I have been unemployed since the summer. I understand that the unemployment benefits are now only 26 weeks, and so I do not know how much I have left.

"Some people criticize the homeless, but if I do not get my job back, I will be homeless.

"My last day of work with Rainbow Transit was August 16 because they supposedly went out of business; but I see Rainbow Transit buses still running.

"I love my job and I want it back. I can't have a job that only pays \$9 an hour and survive."

Another worker, Patricia said, "I have been working as a school bus driver for 23 years. I now work for Gotham Transportation, but this is supposed to be their last year. I do not know what is going to happen after that.

"It is unfair. You dedicate your life to this job, and then it all ends like this.

"This is not an easy job. You have to wake up at 3 AM, go to the base, and get the bus. The first pick-up could be an hour and half away. I have to pick up maybe 12, 15, 20 kids in three schools. Some people think that we sleep afterwards, but it is not like that at all. During the midday, I have trips.

"We go through a lot of challenges with the Board of Ed inspectors and the company. This is a challenging job."



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