

NYC school bus workers hammered by mass layoffs and contract givebacks

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With just days remaining before Bill de Blasio takes the oath of office to become the next mayor, New York City's school bus workers face the combined pressure of the union and the bus companies to either accept huge cuts or suffer layoffs.

Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 called off the strike last February with the claim that various Democratic mayoral aspirants in the fall election had promised to "revisit" the issue of the Employee Protection Plan, the longstanding job security provision that the Bloomberg administration had ripped up. Now, with de Blasio poised to take office, there is every indication, as the WSWs warned, that the attacks on the school bus drivers and matrons will continue. In the aftermath of last year's month-long strike, Local 1181 departed from the longstanding practice of one master contract covering all bus companies. Instead it is negotiating separate agreements between school bus workers and each of the dozens of school bus companies that serve New York City public schools.

Shortly after the strike concluded, the school bus companies unilaterally declared that contract negotiations had reached an impasse and imposed draconian wage and benefit cuts on workers. In all, the imposed contract amounted to an approximately 25 percent reduction in compensation.

In September, however, the National Labor Relations Board ruled that the bus companies acted prematurely and ordered negotiations to resume. The NLRB also awarded back pay under the terms of the old contract.

The NLRB decision was advertised as showing the supposed benefits of government intervention. In the three months since that decision, however, the companies and the union have colluded to force through many of the same cuts. While the specifics vary from company to company, the contract demands are especially severe at Reliant Transportation, the city's second largest school bus company. A proposed contract with Reliant includes cuts in pay, changes in overtime rules and elimination of holidays, just as in the imposed contract that was nullified by the NLRB.

Reliant is a subsidiary of Dallas-based transit giant MV Transportation, which entered the New York City school bus market recently after buying up the bankrupt bus company United. Workers suspect Reliant is trying to undercut the competition and position itself to more successfully compete

for routes up for bid now and in the near future. Reliant is also threatening the loss of hundreds of routes in February if the new contract is not finalized.

The Reliant workers have rejected the concession demands on three separate occasions. Then the Local union officials called a strike vote, knowing full well that the rank and file had already seen that a strike under the control of the union was an exercise in futility. A spokesman for Reliant indicated that it intends to once again declare an impasse and impose its contract offer.

Vicki Guzman, who has worked for Reliant for three years, explained her opposition to the contract. "I never expected to face this when I started working. They made us vote three times for the same thing and still it did not win. This is not fair for nobody. We are workers. People are losing jobs. Reliant took our money and doesn't want to pay us anything."

"The vote at Reliant was against the contract about 600 to 400," Jose Bautista, a fellow Reliant driver, stated. "The company told us if you vote 'yes' we will pay the money we owe you, because of the wage cut from the time of the strike. This is \$5,000 for drivers and \$4,000 for matrons. We voted no three times. They are blackmailing us to vote for the contract with the cuts. Some workers voted 'yes' to the contract because somebody said they will guarantee benefits, but it doesn't say anything about that in the contract."

"The company, and the union too that is agreeing with them, want us to work for \$12 for our whole lives," Jose added. "We will go from \$25.50 to \$12.50 an hour and cut all benefits."

Meanwhile, the layoff threat has become reality for 2,000 Atlantic Express workers after failed attempts by the company and union to force through a massive concessions contract. The contract, which would have also forfeited owed back pay, was essentially the same as the contract imposed after the strike. Atlantic Express, which operated 1,400 routes serving over 40,000 school children, will cease operations at the end of 2013.

The Department of Education is scrambling to find alternative transportation for what amounts to about a fifth of all school bus routes in the city. Thus far only 500 of the 1,400 routes have been picked up by other companies. A letter from the DOE on December 17 warned parents that they should begin planning to put their children on public transportation or taxis

come January 2nd. For many parents, especially with special needs children, this is simply not an option. The city pushed the same options during the strike, leaving tens of thousands of students unable to get to school each day.

In its aftermath, Mayor Bloomberg even bragged about how much money the city saved by not paying bus contractors during the strike. Now with the busing system in disarray, many students and parents may face a repeat of the missed school days and missed work days suffered last January.

For Atlantic workers, their livelihoods hang in the balance. Some drivers may temporarily follow routes picked up by other companies. However this would last only until the Department of Education reissues the contracts for bid. Thereafter—and immediately for workers whose routes are not picked up—the lack of job protections in city contracts translates directly to unemployment.

The WSWs spoke with workers from Atlantic and other companies that have cut jobs this year. Renee from Atlantic commented, “We really don’t know anything. They are keeping us in the dark. They say they are shutting down on December 31st. The company is not telling us anything and the union doesn’t tell us anything.”

“I don’t believe we have a union any more. Now every single school bus company is doing what they want,” she said. “Bloomberg wanted to go out as a shining star. De Blasio hasn’t said anything about us. And the union hasn’t said anything about de Blasio saying nothing. I don’t believe de Blasio is going to do anything.”

Gary Joseph, a worker victimized by the bus company Rainbow, explained, “They put me out right after the strike. I have a case going on against them. The owner said in February she is replacing me permanently, for no reason. But they hired new people for less. That’s the reason. The union didn’t support anybody. They are supposed to work for us. I am on unemployment. \$365 a week but rent is \$1500 a month. I don’t know how it is going to affect me if the extension on unemployment is ended.”

Gaynor, a veteran of over 20 years, was laid off in June when her employer, Hoyt, lost routes. “In April they stopped giving us our overtime and cut our pay seven and a half percent. We are still owed money from Easter and summer vacation. If they don’t give us our jobs, give us the money. They need to go to jail because they are crooks. The poor people are getting ripped up alive.”

In the midst of the latest round of mass layoffs, New York City is working with school bus companies to hold driver recruitment events at the city-run Workforce1 job centers. At least three events have been held this month. The events seek experienced drivers and matrons, but at much lower compensation. Previously, the wages for drivers maxed out at around \$29 an hour. These events offer touted wages up to \$18 an hour. Several companies have also placed ads on Craigslist offering dozens of jobs at even lower rates—less than \$15 an

hour for drivers and \$10 an hour for matrons.

The combined effect of the layoffs, concession contracts and rehiring at rock bottom wages is the total restructuring of the school bus industry in New York City. This is part of a much broader attack, at present targeting public sector workers in city after city. The spearhead of this attack is taking place in Detroit, where the municipal bankruptcy is being used as a tool to force workers into accepting destruction of jobs and pensions, while opening up the city’s resources and public institutions for looting by the banks and other creditors.

In the face of this assault, Local 1181 is offering up the living standards of its workers in exchange for continuing to “represent” them. Local president Michael Cordiello still pulls in a salary of nearly a quarter million dollars a year, even as bus workers are driven into poverty. Seventeen other 1181 bureaucrats likewise draw six-figure salaries.

The tactic to divide bus workers by company and negotiate separate contracts was meant to demonstrate to the incoming mayor the usefulness of the union. The bureaucrats hope to convince de Blasio of their ability to simultaneously achieve some measure of labor stability while meeting the demands of Wall Street by driving down compensation. With the bankruptcy of Atlantic Express leaving a mess for the de Blasio administration to clean up, the union hopes the mayor will be open to cutting a deal to preserve its position, regardless of the impact on bus workers.

As part of this, local 1181 is actively maneuvering among local Democratic politicians. At a recent press conference, Cordiello touted the fact that he had spoken with Bill de Blasio’s staff about the fallout from the Atlantic Express bankruptcy. Public Advocate-elect Letitia James joined Cordiello and called on de Blasio to reinstate the employee protections. She did not call for restoring wages and benefits to their previous level, though she did warn ominously that, “We will not tolerate a repeat of the 2013 school bus strike.”

Even if de Blasio is amenable to some sort of deal with ATU 1181, it will entail deepening the assault on the wages and benefits of workers. To fight these attacks the school bus workers must reject the claims that de Blasio or any other Democratic politician will come to the rescue. An independent struggle is required, breaking with the union and linking up with all city workers to fight for the social rights to a secure job, a decent pension and quality health care for all.



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