

One year since the betrayal of the NYC school bus workers strike

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15 February 2014

One year ago, on February 15, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 abruptly called off the month-long strike by New York City school bus workers without any resolution of the strike demands and without a vote of the membership. The strike had been forced on the nearly 9,000 workers by Mayor Michael Bloomberg's revocation of the decades-long Employment Protection Provision (EPP), which guaranteed the workers continuity of employment and compensation levels regardless of which private company won bus route contracts with the city.

Workers have paid a heavy price for this betrayal. The union recently released lists indicating that nearly two thousand workers--812 drivers and 1094 matrons (attendants who look after the children while they travel)--more than a fifth of the pre-strike total, have lost their jobs. Those who are still working have had their wages and benefits cut and are in a perpetual state of uncertainty over whether they will continue to have jobs.

The companies have taken the union's treachery as a license to carry out ruthless attacks. Some, including Citywide, Rainbow and All-American, simply laid off their entire workforces, offering them re-employment at much lower rates. Punitive layoffs targeting militant workers have also been reported. Several bus companies (e.g., Atlantic Express) have simply shut down, with their bus routes taken up by new or reconstituted companies. In other cases, companies unilaterally imposed new contracts with drastic reductions in pay and benefits.

Through all of this, the union has done nothing to fight the attacks on the members whose interests it purports to represent. All demands by workers that the union take action have been stonewalled. Repeated appeals against the hiring of new workers instead of those with seniority, and similar actions, have either been ignored or met with vague promises that the union is "seeking additional information" for a possible grievance at some unspecified time in the future.

The ATU's utter abandonment of the workers is exemplified by the situation at Reliant, one of the major school bus companies. Workers three times voted down the company's proposed new contract, which included major concessions. Local 1181 President Michael Cordiello issued a statement that

the union did not recommend acceptance of the contract, but offered no alternative other than a new strike. The workers rejected this option, knowing full well that it would simply be a repeat of the previous strike that was betrayed. The contract was then unilaterally imposed by the company.

Typically, drivers who previously earned up to nearly \$30/hour have had their wages cut in half. Those of matrons, who earned as much as \$15/hour, have been cut by about a third. Overtime pay has been severely curtailed. Benefits, such as medical insurance and paid holidays, have been cut back or eliminated. The effect is that school bus workers, who previously had at least a minimally viable standard of living in one of the world's most expensive cities, are being thrown into poverty.

The impact on workers is so egregious that even the *New York Times*, mouthpiece of the city's ruling establishment and vocal supporter of Bloomberg's attack on the school bus workers, carried a story on the devastating impact that the end of the EPP has had on one worker, Nicole Bouchotte, a 61-year-old school bus matron with 20 years of service. Tellingly, the story was run as part of the newspaper's holiday charity appeal, casting the workers as objects of pity.

Experienced and competent workers, who develop strong bonds with the children they transport, and with their families, have been replaced by novices, placing the children at considerable risk. Many of the students have special needs, requiring an enhanced level of care and attention.

Interested only in protecting its own privileged positions and six-figure salaries, the ATU bureaucracy's unilateral ending of the strike was the culmination of its failure to wage any real fight against the scrapping of the EPP. The union leadership purposely isolated the bus workers by refusing to call on city workers to take action in support of the strike, despite the fact that it had widespread support among workers and parents. Such an appeal would have resonated with the city's labor force, which has been working without contracts for years.

Instead, the school bus workers were left to walk picket lines on their own, in the bitter cold, without any communication from the union bureaucrats regarding the status of their struggle. This was not simply incompetence, but rather a conscious strategy to demoralize the workers in order to

facilitate an eventual betrayal by a union with historical ties to organized crime and a record of collusion with the bus companies.

The union leadership's excuse for calling off the strike was based on the completely meaningless promise by the prospective Democratic mayoral candidates to "revisit" the revocation of the EPP after the November election. Since his inauguration, there has been absolutely no indication that the new mayor, "progressive" Democrat Bill de Blasio, has any intention of restoring the EPP. Indeed, with the upcoming negotiations for city worker contracts, de Blasio is undoubtedly planning new attacks, and is unlikely to set any precedents that would get in the way of the preparations to make all city workers pay for the economic crisis.

With growing embitterment among the members over the betrayal by the ATU, pseudo-left groups are attempting to use radical-sounding rhetoric to drive workers back toward the union and ultimately the Democratic Party. A faction within the union, Members for Change, which is receiving advice from Eddie Kay, a union functionary long associated with the Service Employees International Union, has staged several protests, including one in support of complaints filed with the National Labor Relations Board against the ATU for failing to fight the attacks on the workers.

Such appeals to government agencies are not only futile, but represent diversions meant to mislead workers into believing that they can hope for help from a portion of the political establishment, or that the union itself can somehow be reformed. The bankruptcy of this policy has been shown by the NLRB's earlier ruling that workers were entitled to back pay. This has been largely ignored by the companies. The real political agenda behind these appeals was made clear by Kay, who is quoted in *The Chief* civil service newspaper as saying, "These workers would have to be insane to take these contracts. Why not wait for de Blasio?"

The futility of "waiting for de Blasio" was made clear in a February 4 letter from the new mayor to Local 1181 President Cordiello. In the brief letter, written over a month after his inauguration, de Blasio thanked Cordiello for his support, but made absolutely no mention of the school bus workers' situation or of his previous commitment to "revisit" the EPP.

Cordiello, no doubt looking for a new means of duping the workers, has now praised the city's newly elected public advocate, Letitia James, for her call to hold public hearings regarding the EPP. Such hearings, if they occur, will be purely for show.

Throughout the strike and the year that has followed, the *World Socialist Web Site* has been the only news medium to publish the truth regarding the treachery of the ATU and the dangers of reliance on any faction of the political establishment. The WSWS posted dozens of articles that allowed workers to express their views and to speak to each other when the union and the capitalist media shut them out.

The 2013 school bus workers strike and its aftermath have been a bitter but valuable experience for the city's working class. Above all, workers must draw the lesson that their struggle cannot be fought at the trade union level. It is a political battle that must unite the entire working class against Mayor de Blasio and the city's capitalist establishment. The Democrats and Republicans, who both represent the financial and corporate elite, will give no quarter to the working class, as has already been made clear in the bankruptcy of Detroit.

New York is the financial capital of the world, with the highest concentration of the super-wealthy to be found anywhere. The idea that it is impossible for workers to earn enough to maintain a decent standard of living is a self-serving lie, promoted by the elite in order to defend and expand their already fabulous wealth.

The union bureaucrats and their various pseudo-left supporters will do everything in their power to stifle workers' efforts to defend themselves, promoting instead a "reasonable" compromise in upcoming contract negotiations. Tremendous pressure will be applied on the workers from all quarters to accept further attacks on living standards, supposedly in order to save the city from fiscal crisis and protect social services. Workers must reject these lies.

The conditions exist for uniting millions of workers, the unemployed and youth, but it is only possible on the basis of a new perspective and new methods of struggle. The ongoing treachery of the ATU clearly demonstrates, as the WSWS has repeatedly urged, that school bus workers and all city workers must break from the trade union apparatus and form their own independent rank-and-file committees armed with a socialist program. Only in this way can the struggle for the basic rights of employment, decent wages, education, health care, retirement, and access to recreation and culture be carried forward.



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