

New York mayor offers empty words to besieged school bus workers

Dan Brennan
20 March 2014

When 9,000 striking school bus workers were ordered back to work after a determined month-long struggle to defend their wages and job security last year, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 defended its betrayal by saying that a new Democratic mayor would come to their rescue.

The 2013 strike had been provoked when then-mayor Michael Bloomberg abrogated the Employee Protection Provision (EPP) between the city and private bus companies that provide student transportation. The longstanding provision allowed workers at firms that lost routes to transfer to other companies and maintain the wage and benefit levels of their previous jobs. Bloomberg opened up bidding for 1,100 school bus routes without this protection.

Between the end of the strike in February 2013 and the end of Bloomberg's term in December, the mayor rushed through two more rounds of bidding without the EPP. As a direct consequence, two thousand workers have been laid off and thousands more have seen their pay cut substantially, many by as much as half. Where previously veteran drivers were earning up to \$29 an hour—still a modest sum considering the cost of living in New York—today experienced drivers are being rehired for about \$15 an hour, and matrons, responsible for the safety of the children on school buses, are being paid \$10 an hour.

When the union executives ended the strike, they solicited a letter signed by the major Democratic candidates for mayor that promised to “revisit” the issue of the EPP. When Bill de Blasio was elected last November the ATU told workers this was cause for celebration.

Nearly three months after the supposedly progressive de Blasio took office, however, there has been no “revisiting” of the EPP. The new mayor was silent until

the end of February, while his key labor negotiators have focused their attention on coming to terms on new concessions contracts with hundreds of thousands of city employees, beginning with the 100,000 members of the United Federation of Teachers.

Finally, at a news conference on February 26, a reporter asked de Blasio about the EPP. The mayor gave a carefully worded response implying that Bloomberg had tied his hands. “I think the bottom line is I would have preferred if as a result of the election, the administration had suspended its efforts and given us a chance to reset the situation according to the values that I put forward and that were ratified by the people,” said de Blasio. He then added, “We have to make that something we act on in the coming weeks. We haven't, unfortunately, been able to get to that yet but we intend to.”

These assurances were intentionally vague. The letter he signed last year promising to “revisit” the EPP issue also pledged that future contracts should be “fiscally responsible,” the phrase that translates as making city workers pay to assure the profits of the banks and bondholders.

“Revisiting” could mean many things in this context. It is even possible that a new version of the EPP—worked out with the ATU—would guarantee workers that current wages of \$15 an hour be maintained!

The union's negotiation of separate contracts with individual school bus companies last year provides another opportunity to drive down wages. Companies that have already imposed lower wages could submit low bids and win bus routes from the city. A revamped EPP could then offer laid off drivers and matrons the choice between a low-wage job and unemployment.

These developments highlight the fact that the

difference between de Blasio and Bloomberg is one of style and tactics, not of substance. The difference is that de Blasio is more likely to use the assistance of the trade unions, rather than stonewalling them or dispensing with their services as Bloomberg did. Such collaboration with the unions is a crucial means to impose even deeper attacks on the working class.

The challenge facing the school bus workers must also be seen in the context of the recent report that the new administration is proposing a nine-year contract with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), in which the back pay that they are owed after working for years without a contract would reportedly become part of future increases. The meager pay hikes would be paid for with longer work hours, the expansion of punitive teacher evaluations and new givebacks on health care and pensions.

In response to de Blasio's press conference remarks, Local 1181 President Michael Cordiello stated, "we will now finally be working with an administration that cares about our issues and about working people, about income inequality and the 'tale of two cities.'"

This is a fraud. The Democrats, from President Obama and New York Governor Andrew Cuomo on the federal and state level to countless big city mayors, from Philadelphia to Detroit, have spearheaded the attack on public education. The attack on school bus drivers is part of the overall to slash costs, privatize schools and undermine the right to public education for working class youth.

In a letter to the membership, Cordiello wrote, "No other workforce in either the public or private sector has been targeted as harshly and driven into poverty as aggressively as our city's school bus drivers and matrons... the thousands of workers who have been laid off and the thousands of others whose jobs are at risk since the EPP were stripped out of a number of school bus contracts have put their faith in the Mayor to correct this injustice."

The desperate conditions Cordiello describes are the direct result of the betrayal of last year's strike by the ATU, UFT and other city unions, which isolated the school bus workers and blocked any unified struggle by city workers against the mayor and his attacks.

Cordiello, UFT President Michael Mulgrew and the rest of the union executives are not opposed to the destruction of their members' jobs and living

standards—they only want a "seat at the table" to defend their own financial and institutional interests. For Cordiello & Co. the destruction of the EPP undermined the cozy relations the ATU had long enjoyed with private bus contractors and the school administration.

Cordiello is more than willing to work with the de Blasio to achieve a "fiscally responsible contract" as long as it includes some form of "job security" for the ATU executives. Having survived the onslaught of the Bloomberg administration and the weathered a potential rebellion by rank-and-file workers from below, the union officials now have a mayor with whom they hope to do business again.

All of the bitter experiences of the school bus workers—with the union, with every section of the so-called "labor" movement and its pseudo-left supporters, and with the big business politicians of the Democratic Party—demonstrate that a new political strategy and new methods of struggle are required.

In response to the surrender of the union after the month-long strike last year, the Socialist Equality Party worked with school bus workers to organize a rank and file committee, which initiated a fight to mobilize school bus workers independently of the union apparatus. The SEP denounced the efforts of the ATU to subordinate the struggle of school bus workers and other city employees to the election of a Democratic mayor, who, we warned, would only escalate the attacks on the working class.

If school bus drivers and other city workers are to defend their jobs and living standards, this initiative must be revived and taken forward today. Above all a political struggle must be launched, uniting all sections of city workers in a common struggle against both big business parties and the capitalist profit system they defend.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact