

Mayor De Blasio rebuffs New York school bus workers

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Time is running out for thousands of New York City school bus workers. This June, approximately 2,500 drivers and attendants are slated to lose their jobs when current contracts covering 1,400 routes expire. Pink slips are already being sent out to the current workforce.

This round of new contracts between the city and the bus companies, like the one before it that cost 2,000 school bus workers their jobs, does not contain employee protection provisions, or EPPs. These provisions had for more than 30 years guaranteed that bus workers could keep their jobs, pay and benefits, even if their routes were picked up by another company.

A third and final round of school bus routes is currently open for bidding through May 12. These routes cover 4,000 more bus workers, all of whom will face the same fate in June 2015.

The removal of EPPs from bid requests last year by then-mayor Michael Bloomberg triggered a strike of nearly 9,000 bus workers. After a month of isolating the striking workers, ATU Local 1181 shut down the strike on the fraudulent pretext that Bloomberg's Democratic successor could be counted on to reverse the attacks. De Blasio was one of several candidates to sign a letter promising to revisit the EPPs.

The day after the strike ended, the WSWs warned: "The president of Local 1181 of the ATU, Michael Cordiello, and ATU International President Larry Hanley told workers they should go back to work on the basis of a letter signed by five candidates for the Democratic nomination for mayor of New York. The five called for an end to the strike and promised that if elected they would 'revisit the school transportation system and contracts.' This is a fraud. The Democrats no less than the Republicans are determined to force

workers to pay for the economic crisis created by the ruling class. However, they prefer to do so using the services of the highly paid functionaries that control the unions."

The correctness of this analysis is becoming clearer by the day. Two months away from mass layoffs, and one month from further entrenching the removal of job protections in city contracts, Mayor de Blasio has steadfastly refused to intervene. Phony rhetoric of "grassroots, people-powered government" notwithstanding, the assault on workers in the school bus industry begun by Bloomberg continues under the new mayor.

In a clear signal that there will be no restoration of the EPP, the de Blasio administration refused to attend a city council hearing March 27 on the school bus industry in the aftermath of the removal of the EPP and its impact on workers.

Instead, deputy schools chancellor Kathleen Grimm, on behalf of the mayor, submitted only a written statement to the hearing. The statement focused largely on the history of the EPP, including a court case that city lawyers—though not Grimm herself—admit does not prohibit the inclusion of the EPP from contracts. Grimm is a veteran of the Bloomberg administration, holding the same position when the attack on school bus workers began more than a year ago.

The statement went on to make the provocative claim that under the new school bus contracts the number of jobs for drivers and attendants remains the same as before, since the total number of routes has not changed. The fact that thousands of laid-off workers are given the choice of either accepting unemployment or being rehired at poverty wages is of little concern to the supposed "friend of labor" in Gracie Mansion. No reference was made to the pending layoffs, to the pay

and benefit cuts, or to the wholesale conversion of the school busing into a low-wage industry that de Blasio is now overseeing.

The only commitment the de Blasio administration was willing to make was a further delay. “In light of the arrival of the new administration,” the statement read, “[Department of Education (DOE)] with support of other agencies is currently reviewing the benefits and drawbacks of the [bidding] process began in 2011 and various options to proceed. We are using these criteria (safety of DOE students and quality of service, worker protection and fairness, and fiscal responsibility and sustainability) to review current conditions and consider directions for the future. DOE looks forward to sharing its findings and plans on improving bus service for all students based on the aforementioned criteria in the upcoming months.”

The council hearing itself was an exercise in political cynicism. It allowed Democratic city politicians to posture as defenders of school bus workers, without any risk that the wishes of the city’s financial elite will be challenged.

The attempt to channel opposition into the safe structures of city government was led by Letitia James, the public advocate. During the hearing, she repeatedly denounced the attacks on bus drivers and matrons as the “feminization of poverty” on the basis that a narrow majority of bus workers are women. For her, it is not the impoverishment of the working class that is at issue, but rather an exercise in identity politics to obscure the class nature of the attacks and the responsibility of the Democrats for imposing them.

Playing an indispensable role in this task is the union. During the strike and its aftermath, Local 1181 has demonstrated its willingness to assist in the attack on school bus workers. As union functionaries cash in on six-figure salaries, they continue to collaborate with bus companies to impose wage and benefit cuts, punish workers who dare to resist, and refuse to lift a finger to prevent mass layoffs. All the while, they promote the illusion that the de Blasio administration and the Democratic Party as a whole will come to the rescue and restore the gains won over the past decades.

At the hearing, this led to the spectacle of Local 1181 leadership, as well as the dissident faction, showering praise upon an administration that had nothing to offer but a cold shoulder. ATU Local 1181 president Michael

Cordiello commented that in 2015, when all the contracts will have been reissued without EPPs, “in this industry, the tale of two cities our mayor so eloquently and passionately denounced in his successful campaign will have been achieved. We must not let that happen, not on this mayor’s watch.”

Eddie Kay, a leader of the dissident Members for Change faction, added: “As to attacking de Blasio, I’d be attacking myself. I’ve worked 10 months for de Blasio. It was a privilege. In fact the high point is that right before the primary I told him we’d get 40.65 [percent of the vote]. I was two tenths of one percent off, so I got a big apple as a prize for predicting the closest amount. And he has always said that when push comes to shove he will be here. And so we have to make sure that the people in OPT [Office of Pupil Transportation within the DOE], who are—half of them aren’t doing their jobs—we have to make sure that he gets on top of that.”

Members for Change, no less than the current leadership embodied by the corrupt and discredited Cordiello, seeks to tie workers to the bankrupt politics of de Blasio and the city’s Democratic establishment. This orientation is embedded in the entire union apparatus, which is fully integrated on a national level in the Democratic Party.

The task confronting the school bus workers, the hundreds of thousands of city workers without a contract, and the working class as a whole is to advance its own interests through a unified struggle, in opposition to the bought-and-paid-for Democratic politicians and their partners in the unions.



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