

Thousands more layoffs imminent for New York school bus workers

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The onslaught against New York City school bus workers, begun a year and a half ago under billionaire ex-mayor Michael Bloomberg, is continuing unabated under his Democratic successor and self-proclaimed “progressive,” Bill de Blasio. Less than a month remains before 2,500 drivers and attendants are shown the door, dismissed in an attack justified in the name of fiscal responsibility.

During the Bloomberg administration, New York City’s Department of Education issued three rounds of bid requests without longstanding Employee Protection Provisions, or EPPs, which for the past 35 years had guaranteed current bus workers would keep their jobs at the same wage and benefit levels regardless of which company won the bids.

The first round of bids without EPPs sparked a walkout in January and February of 2013. The strike was subsequently isolated and betrayed, both by the workers’ union, ATU Local 1181, and the rest of the city unions. Last June the disastrous impact of the sellout first materialized: 2,000 bus workers were laid off as the first contracts expired.

The second round of contracts, 1,400 special education school bus routes covering 2,500 workers, expires at the end of the current school year on June 26. It will mark the first mass layoffs under the de Blasio administration. Workers on these routes have already received pink slips.

Some of the 16 companies that won round-two contracts by submitting lowest cost bids may offer to rehire some laid-off workers, but at drastically reduced wages. Decades of hard work, sacrifice and professionalism will amount to nothing, as their livelihoods are ripped up, and what jobs remain transporting children safely to and from school each day are transformed into poverty-level work with minimal if any benefits.

Under contracts with EPPs, bus drivers averaged a modest \$38,000 annually, attendants \$20,000. The going

rate without the EPP is approximately \$25,000 for drivers and \$17,000 for attendants, with greatly reduced benefits. At \$15 an hour or less, the ability of workers to keep up with rent, educate their children, pay for medical care and even put food on the table in New York City, one of the most expensive urban areas in the US, becomes a nearly impossible task.

In New York, as elsewhere, there has been a rapid proliferation of low-wage work alongside the destruction of jobs that once paid decent wages and benefits. It has reached the point where the share of adult workers who are classified as low-wage earners has grown citywide to an astonishing 35 percent.

Directly related is the accumulation of obscene levels of wealth at the top. Even as bus workers are told that \$30,000 a year is excessive, two weeks ago in midtown Manhattan, the auction house Christie’s sold off \$744 million worth of modern art by 11 artists to a handful of billionaires, who no doubt value the paintings primarily as lucrative investments and status symbols. The amount of money exchanged in a few hours could fund the salaries of the 2,500 laid-off bus workers for 10 full years.

Under these conditions, de Blasio and his fellow Democrats are relied upon by the wealthy to keep social tensions in check. De Blasio’s strategy for doing so is a departure from the arrogant provocations of Bloomberg. The new mayor, by contrast, campaigned on the issue of inequality and a “Tale of Two Cities.” He prefers to prosecute the attacks on the working class at a slower tempo: a nine-year contract with city teachers, for example, that will see real wages fall and workplace rights dismantled over time. In doing so, he utilizes the services of the unions to police the workforce.

Nevertheless the overall policy remains the same: to protect an economic and social setup that enriches a few at the top while driving down the living standards of the working class. So while de Blasio has offered up a fig

leaf, postponing the due date for the third round of bids from May to August—after the scheduled election of offices in Local 1181—he refuses to intervene to prevent the mass layoff of bus workers this June or restore the job cuts made last year.

Along the same lines, his fellow Democrats in the state capital have introduced a bill to restore the EPPs. The bill is nearly identical to the one vetoed by Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo three years ago. “To mandate that [the New York City Department of Education] include EPPs in its contracts would undermine its ability [sic] control costs and ensure the best quality service for the City’s school children and taxpayers,” Cuomo’s 2011 veto message read.

Far from being genuine moves to protect the workers, de Blasio’s postponement of bids and the state legislators’ introduction of an EPP bill are ruses to cover up the basic agreement by politicians of both political parties that the working class must pay for the economic crisis. To the extent that the city and state are considering restoring employee protections, it will be on the basis of perpetuating the new, “fiscally responsible” wages of \$15 an hour.

Local 1181 president Michael Cordiello, currently up for reelection, hailed these maneuvers in an attempt to save face and boost the prospects of retaining his current quarter-million dollar salary. “Today’s news that the Department of Education will postpone the 2015 school bus contract bids from [May] to August 1 gives Mayor de Blasio and his administration more time to really see the disastrous effects of a workforce without Employee Protection Provisions,” Cordiello announced last week. If one year and 2,000 layoffs wasn’t enough, perhaps adding another three months will do the trick!

Among school bus workers there is widespread and justifiable contempt for Cordiello, who is being challenged in the union elections by a unified opposition slate. The litany of grievances against the current president is long indeed: during the strike he actively kept workers isolated, refusing to make any genuine appeals to other sections of workers and shutting the strike down without any substantive discussion let alone a vote. He engaged in retribution against opposition leaders, collaborated with bus companies to off-load higher paid drivers, and carved up what had been a single master contract into company-by-company contracts to facilitate wage cutting.

In terms of basic orientation, however, the union opposition can offer no alternative. Both factions are

utterly prostrate before the de Blasio administration. Eddie Kay, speaking on behalf of the Members for Change opposition group, conceded as much during a City Council hearing last month. After bragging about his involvement in the mayor’s election campaign, he refused to condemn de Blasio for boycotting the hearing. “As to attacking de Blasio, I’d be attacking myself,” he said.

In union after union in recent decades workers have seen an opposition faction take power on a platform of militancy and change, only to continue where the previous leadership left off. School bus workers need only look to their fellow transit workers at the New York City Transportation Authority, to whom their wages were once linked. The current leadership of Transport Workers Union Local 100, a product of the “New Directions” dissident faction, oversaw two years without a contract since taking office, only to push through a concessions deal this month that raids the pension fund of fellow workers at Long Island Rail Road.

The main issue facing school bus workers is not one of choosing which union faction gets to subordinate their struggle to the Democratic Party. It must be understood that the attacks against them come out of an economic system in crisis, which demands the decimation of living standards for broad layers of the population even as extraordinary levels of inequality grow. Democrats serve to defend this system just as much as Republicans. The only realistic course to save school bus drivers’ jobs lies in transforming the fight into a political challenge against both parties of big business. A unified struggle against concessions, inequality and growing poverty requires a political strategy, breaking the stranglehold of the unions to mobilize the working class as a whole against the capitalist profit system.



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