

New York mayor reneges on pledge to school bus drivers

Daniel de Vries
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After months of delay New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio last week unveiled his administration's policy towards the city's besieged school bus workers. The Democratic mayor refused to restore long-standing job protections, which were removed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg after he defeated the strike by 9,000 drivers and aides in 2013.

Instead de Blasio offered up a temporary grant program that allows for wage subsidies to a limited subset of bus workers. The program expires next year and contains no guarantees that eligible workers will actually receive the wage subsidies. Nor are there any guarantees that any of the thousands of laid off workers will ever be rehired.

The outcome is a slap in the face to bus drivers, attendants and mechanics, who fought tenaciously to preserve their contractual job protections and wage gains in a month-long strike last year. The bus workers union, Local 1181 of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), called off the walkout based on a supposed pledge by de Blasio and the other Democratic mayoral candidates to "revisit" the issue if elected.

Since taking office, de Blasio has acted as though restoring bus workers' job protections is beyond the city's control. In this he has followed the lead of Bloomberg, who cited a state Court of Appeals ruling in 2011 supposedly invalidating the longstanding Employee Protection Provisions, or EPP, in contracts with bus companies.

However, even the billionaire ex-mayor was forced admit the city had the option of maintaining the EPP by rewriting a clause in the contracts to provide greater transparency on labor costs. Bloomberg simply declared it was in the city's financial interest not to do so.

Demonstrating the essential agreement with his

predecessor, de Blasio made no attempt to restore the EPP. Instead he worked with the City Council to duck behind a toothless resolution calling on the state legislature to enact a law restoring the job protections. Not lost on de Blasio and the Democratic-controlled Council are Albany's recent failures to do just that: once in 2011, when Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo vetoed an EPP bill that passed the State Senate and Assembly, and again this year when a similar bill died without a vote in either house.

With no EPP forthcoming, the mayor's office worked with Local 1181 officials to fashion a substitute acceptable to the city's corporate elite. The outcome--a grant subsidy program signed into law by de Blasio last Thursday--authorizes a maximum of \$42 million in payments, a fraction of the more than \$400 million in savings over five years achieved by removing the EPP requirements from contracts.

The grants would be funneled to companies that employ eligible drivers, matrons and mechanics on a batch of routes awarded at the most recent bid competition. In theory the grants would fund the difference between last year's wage and benefit level and this year's. Under previous contracts, experienced drivers could earn up to \$29 an hour. The going rate without the EPP is now around \$15 an hour.

However the limitations of the program make it questionable how much of the \$42 million will actually end up in the pockets of bus workers. Grants will only be offered to 16 bus companies out of a total of 37, which operate just 20 percent of the school bus routes. To receive funds, companies must agree to pay into the pension and health care system for each qualified employee. Newly hired employees without seniority do not qualify. Companies that demonstrate compliance with program requirements would receive monthly

payments from the city, which supposedly would flow down to the employees.

Even if the program works as promised, the subsidy only restores wages and benefits to last school year's levels, when bus companies had already pushed through substantial cuts following the strike.

On the other hand, the entire program may be subject to cancellation if it is struck down in the courts. The legality was called into question during the City Council hearings last month. Bus companies that lost contracts with the city, primarily because they factored in higher wage costs, will likely argue that the low bidders were unfairly rewarded by the city subsidizing employee wages. De Blasio acknowledged the possibility of a court challenge in remarks last week. "There may be lawsuits," he said, "but I'm not concerned because we believe we're on very sound legal ground."

In any case the grant funding expires after one year, leaving in place the contracts with companies most aggressive in slashing wages and benefits. There is little chance the grants will be extended. "I'm going to vote 'aye' on it," Council member Jumaane Williams said of the bill authorizing the grant program, "but I want to make clear that if it comes again next year, I will not vote 'aye' on it."

Local 1181 President Michael Cordiello presented the maneuver as a great victory. "It's an opportunity for the city of New York and their children to get the best qualified service that they can," he said in an interview with the *New York Times*. Days earlier, in testimony before the Committee on Education, he commended de Blasio and the City Council for their action on the grant program and resolution.

Following months in which Cordiello repeatedly sent workers an "EPP update!!!" raising the expectation of an imminent restoration of their job security, the outcome exposes the reality of the union's policy of binding workers to the Democratic Party. From the outset, the ATU and other city worker officials were determined to block the school bus workers strike from encouraging a broader mobilization of the working class against Bloomberg and the Wall Street interests he spoke for. The unions fully support the austerity measures being imposed by both big business parties and are concerned only that they be included as partners in the process.

The agreement worked out between the mayor and Local 1181 is designed to politically disarm school bus and other city workers by promoting illusions in a political system that channels ever greater wealth to the super-rich at the expense of the working class.

A time bomb is ticking for school bus workers, with 4,000 layoffs pending and the grant program, if implemented, expiring at the end of the 2014-2015 school year. The lessons of the past 20 months must be drawn. To defend their livelihoods, workers need to break free of both parties of big business and the trade unions that defend them, and embark on a new strategy to mobilize the working class against the profit system.



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