

Laid off New York City school bus workers ignored by Mayor de Blasio

Philip Guelpa
14 October 2014

Hundreds of New York City school bus workers rallied at City Hall last Friday demanding the rehiring of workers laid off due to the revoking of the long-standing Employment Protection Provision (EPP) by former mayor Michael Bloomberg more than two years ago.

The EPP, in place since the 1960s and defended in a bitter strike in 1979, required that student transportation companies maintain workers' pay and benefits regardless of which one of them won contracts with the Department of Education. As a result of the elimination of the provision, some 3,500 out of nearly 9,000 workers have lost their jobs and thousands more have had their pay and benefits slashed.

Workers went on strike for nearly a month in early 2013 to defend the EPP. The strike was isolated and shut down by the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1181 based on a worthless promise by Democratic mayoral candidates, including current mayor Bill de Blasio, to "revisit" the issue once they were elected.

Despite the string of promises by the de Blasio administration and union bureaucrats, predictably nothing has materialized. Instead, the bus companies have targeted older, more experienced workers for layoff and have replaced them with raw recruits, at much lower pay. This has placed school children at a substantially higher risk for accidents.

After months of ignoring the workers, the de Blasio administration recently approved a \$42 million grant to subsidize school bus workers' pay and benefits for one year. This action is, in effect, a public subsidy for the private companies' wage cutting and the owners' profits. It has also done nothing for the thousands of workers who have already lost their jobs.

One company, Reliant, used the subsidy to pay workers who made up half of its 1,800 positions, while filling up the other half with newly hired workers who are being paid substantially lower wages and no benefits. In response to anger from rank-and-file workers, the union threatened to call a strike and then quickly withdrew the warning.

The Friday rally was organized by "Members for

Change," a rival faction to Local 1181 President Michael Cordiello. Despite his betrayal of the strike, Cordiello was reelected following a campaign during which the Members for Change group offered no meaningful alternative to Cordiello's collaboration with the Democrats.

The purpose of the rally was to deliver a petition to the mayor demanding the laid off workers be included in the upcoming "master pick" to fill open positions based on established seniority. At this time, only about 50 positions are open. With contracts for more bus companies set to expire in the future, thousands of additional workers face the loss of their jobs.

The futility of appealing to the supposedly "progressive" mayor was clearly illustrated when no representative from his administration would come out to meet the demonstrators. Instead, the assembled workers were treated to speeches by leaders of Members for Change exhorting them to "keep agitating."

Rally organizers promoted the idea that de Blasio and Cordiello would be able to convince the New York State Legislature and Governor Andrew Cuomo to pass legislation to reinstate the EPP. Similar legislation was vetoed by Cuomo two years ago and failed to even come to a vote in either chamber of the legislature last year. There is no reason to believe a different result is in store for the future.

Interviews with both Cordiello and Berlot Jean-Baptiste, one of the leaders of Members for Change, published in the October 6 edition of the city workers' newspaper *The Chief* make clear both union factions intend to keep workers tied to the Democratic Party. While serving the interests of the union bureaucracy—who maintain their high paid positions by proving their worth as a labor police force for the big business politicians—the subordination of the working class to the Democrats only produces disorientation and disaster for workers.

The WSWs spoke with several workers at the rally. Yves Lorimel and Roberth Benjamin have 20 and 22 years, respectively, as school bus drivers. They have not worked for the last two months since Consolidated Bus Company

laid them off.

Yves explained, “They want to lay off old-timers so they can hire new drivers for half the salary. Top drivers made \$29 an hour and matrons half that, but now they are paying \$15 with no job guarantee and \$10 for matrons. Mayor de Blasio promised \$42 million to help keep us employed, but the Reliant company is hiring people right off the street.”

Rovert added, “They don’t care about the EPP. The OPT [the city’s Office of Pupil Transportation] is certifying new drivers while the union stays silent. Those people like de Blasio just want to get into office. The \$42 million is politics. Not many have been called back. There are only 1,500 drivers and 1,500 matrons left and half of Local 1181 is out of jobs.

“Cordiello will learn how many runs are being offered. At the October 7 meeting they said only 50 runs were being offered by all the companies. The companies that now have the EPP have contracts that expire in June. So if the EPP bill does not go through as promised, all the school bus industry will go for the low bids.”

Rovert declared, “This is the capitalist system at its best. Somebody wins, somebody loses.”

Yves continued, “We live in the city, our taxes pay for the city, and our kids were born in the city. This was supposed to be a secure job. I started 20 years ago for \$13.50 and that is where I am again. Revolution is the solution in Haiti where I am from. There has to be revolution here, too.”

Sonia Figueroa and Ruth Torres also spoke to the WSWS. Sonia said, “We hope something gets done. They said there is no work and laid us off, but they are hiring people. People at All-American, Atlantic Express and more—all 1181 workers in those companies—lost their jobs. Now 1181 has us on their layoff list, not the seniority list.”

Ruth added, “This is our second layoff. The first was after the strike in February 2013. They gave us a layoff letter in April and June 2013 was the last day of work. We were out of work for about six months. Unemployment ran out in January after 26 weeks. Obama cut the extension down. In February, we went to the Master Pick and were sent to work at All-American. Then in May they gave us the letter of determination and we were laid off again in June. We were paid only three days of our vacation. And unemployment now is less. It had been \$350 to \$375 a month. Now they are giving us between \$183 and \$191.”

Sonia continued, “How am I supposed to pay the mortgage of \$1,500 a month? Turn-off notices are coming left and right. Only my husband is working and he’s in sales, which is not that secure. They don’t give you a break. The gas, light, telephone company bills still come every month. I will not have heat and hot water in the winter.”

Ruth added, “My unemployment is not enough to pay for

anything. It is going to get to the point that people are going to start robbing. There are no jobs. People are losing their homes. We want to work to pay for our own homes. Light is going up. Everything is going up.”

Gladys Decayette was a matron at the Hoyt bus company for six years until it went bankrupt in the summer of 2013. She said, “Hoyt is back and running again. They hired all new people at lower wages. When we call the union and ask why they didn’t hire us back again they just blame it on Bloomberg. De Blasio is now doing the same thing Bloomberg did. There is no change.”

Her daughter Daphne added, “Obama isn’t doing anything either. He is not helping. When it comes to unemployment compensation, he should have extended it. But all he does is make speeches.”

Jean Isaac is an unemployed driver who worked at the biggest bus company, Atlantic Express, with thousands of workers before it went bankrupt. “We have a big problem with our union. They caused this mess as well. We have more than 3,000 out of work, and the union president says nothing. He sits in his office doing nothing all day. It is a big mess for hard working people. We never did anything to be punished like this. Why do we have to suffer like this? Why?”

Pierre Renois, another laid off Hoyt worker, echoed these angry sentiments. “De Blasio is doing the same as Bloomberg did. They are kicking us all to the curb. With all the bus companies, they are hiring every day. But they are not hiring the old workers back and our unemployment is running out.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact