

# Portsmouth, Virginia school bus drivers stage sick out

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On Monday school bus drivers in Portsmouth, Virginia collectively called in sick to protest poor pay and working conditions. According to Portsmouth Public Schools Assistant Superintendent Chris Steele, 38 out of 105 drivers called in sick, prompting the school system to use substitute drivers and have some drivers go on double runs.

The sick out caused 15-45 minutes delays in pickups of elementary and preschool children. Bus drivers for the middle and high schools did not participate.

Drivers are angry over low wages and difficult working conditions. Buses and equipment are poorly maintained, with drivers purchasing cleaning supplies like paper towels and disinfectant spray out of their own pockets. Safety equipment, like security cameras and radios, is outdated or broken.

Drivers often double as disciplinarians, having to keep order on the buses they operate. They say that broken radios make it difficult to report fights and other incidents and that school officials take no action against students who exhibit behavioral problems. Further, drivers do not receive holiday pay or additional compensation if they have to make additional runs.

According to the *Virginian-Pilot* newspaper, bus drivers for the school system earn poverty wages, ranging from \$11,230 to \$17,620 annually (\$11.75 - \$17.83 hourly). Drivers started to organize themselves this past summer, and, along with bus monitors, aired grievances to the School Board at a September meeting.

"Venus," a school bus driver, in a comment posted on the *WTKR News Channel 3* website wrote, "It's important to note that school bus drivers rarely make eight hours a day. They may get as few as five hours; so that hourly rate is not what the public may think it is. Plus, it's hard to supplement that income because of the split schedule during the day. For drivers with

families, and children of their own, second shift is not an option and third shift would jeopardize the safety of the students. So many of us bide our time until a better job comes open. Some of us stay because we love the kids, and know despite the fact that the job is thankless, it's an important job."

Bus drivers in Norfolk, just across the Elizabeth River from Portsmouth, have staged a number of similar sick out actions in recent years, including one this past summer. The Norfolk drivers also complained to the School Board in September, with the latter feigning sympathy and offering assurances in what has become a familiar pattern.

On Tuesday, the school board called a mandatory meeting for all Portsmouth bus drivers, who were again allowed to express their grievances. School officials promised a two percent across the board raise starting in December.

At the time of this writing, the sick out appears to be over, with no work actions taking place on Wednesday, November 5.

The Portsmouth bus drivers held their own press conference on Tuesday, with some implying that further action might be necessary. The drivers wore bright yellow t-shirts reading, "PPS Drivers and Monitors. Time to make a change. Let's make it happen."

One of the organizers of the drivers' and monitors' group, Lori Miltier, told reporters that she and her colleagues would continue to struggle for better pay and conditions.

"People keep saying, 'Do it for the children, do it for the children.' We've been doing it for the children ... But I mean, when do you stop saying do it for the children and you gotta stand up and do it for yourself?"

No local trade union official or political leader has

offered support to the bus drivers, much less made any call for sympathetic work actions.

The Portsmouth school bus drivers' actions demonstrate considerable courage and tenacity.

For any meaningful improvement in their conditions, however, a broader political offensive, mobilizing wider sections of the working class, is necessary.

We urge bus drivers and monitors to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* to tell their story and to build a leadership to prepare for future struggles.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**