

New York City mayor bids out final school bus routes without job protections

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New York City's Department of Education, now run by the city's Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio, has announced that it is accepting bids from companies to operate a number of school bus routes, mostly for children with special needs who cannot otherwise get to school. These bids will lack the Employee Protection Provision (EPP) that guaranteed workers' seniority rights and wage scales for over 30 years.

The move is an unmitigated disaster for over 4,000 school bus drivers, attendants (matrons) and mechanics, who will either lose their jobs or be forced to accept substantially reduced wages and benefits in New York City, where the cost of living is among the highest in the US.

This is the third in three rounds of such bids. The previous two were conducted under the administration of the former mayor, billionaire Michael Bloomberg. While his successor, de Blasio, allowed the bid awards that Bloomberg put into place to stand, and the resulting layoffs to unfold under his watch, this round will be the first entirely of de Blasio's own making.

De Blasio delayed the bid competition for over a year, all the while claiming to be open to some sort of resolution to protect workers' jobs and wages. He passed the buck in calling on the state legislature in Albany to legislate the EPP back into city contracts. Issuing these bids has exposed the complete fraud of de Blasio's attempt to posture as a friend of the school bus workers.

The performance period in the bids begins in 2016. With workers on the 4,000 routes in the final year of their current contract with carry-over EPP, it is unclear whether the companies will carry out immediate layoffs and wage reductions at the end of this year or whether they will be bound by the terms of the previous contract with the city. (There are rumors of a one-year contract among bus workers.)

On February 15, 2013, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1181 shut down a strike of 9,000 school bus workers against the administration of then-Mayor Bloomberg over the issue of eliminating the EPP from the bidding process. In an attempt to mask its betrayal, it

solicited and received a letter from the five Democratic mayoral candidates that, if elected, they would "revisit" the guarantee of the EPP in the bidding process.

While the union has said nothing to the workers about this latest attack, the failure to include EPP in the new bids has not surprised many bus workers who have seen their living standards crash in the last two years.

One school bus worker, Jose, told the WSWWS, "I lost my job at Atlantic Express shortly after the strike. A lot of workers lost their jobs because when the contract expired at the end of the school year, we lost our EPP. This is what Bloomberg wanted.

"I am now doing the same work as before, driving school children and certified by the Board of Education, at a company called L&M, for a little bit more than one half of my original pay. In order to survive I need to work the weekends.

"I thought de Blasio was more for the workers, for poor people, and that is what my fellow workers thought as well. A lot of them said that we should all vote for him, and they did. I don't trust de Blasio anymore. The union told us to vote for him as well. The union is corrupt. They are making money."

Renne, also a former driver for Atlantic, said, "De Blasio has turned his back on us. The union has turned its back on us. I heard there was a master pick yesterday, and I'm waiting to hear what happened. I'm lucky because I have 23 years, and I am working. But I worked with a woman for six years who had 10 years with the company. When her unemployment ran out after the strike, she was forced to return to work as a new-hire and start over. As a new-hire, she is now making \$11 an hour."

A driver for the Reliant bus company said, "This morning the union rep said it will be difficult to get the EPP back. I did not say anything because I know that means we will never get the EPP again. That is a big problem. We don't have vacation or overtime, even if we come back seven or eight o'clock at night."

Over the last two years over five thousand workers have

faced a similar fate as bids were let out in a process that began under the Bloomberg administration. But the union continued to promote the lie that was the basis for stopping the 2013 strike—that the Democrats would be different than Bloomberg.

For over 30 years, the bids were taken with the EPP guarantees. Language mandating the EPP was written into the bids after the bus workers' 1978 strike. When Bloomberg announced in 2012 that the protections would be removed, the union treated this as the whim of a selfish billionaire. It was unable to prevent a strike, but it systematically worked to isolate it from other workers in New York City and to limit the number of pickets at garages.

After calling off the strike, Local 1181 President Michael Cordiello showcased his meetings with de Blasio and other Democratic politicians, and bragged that the Democratic-dominated New York State Senate would pass a law enshrining the EPP protection. Small groups of his supporters rallied at City Hall to keep up the farce that pressure would restore the EPP.

Finally, last year the de Blasio administration added a one-time \$42 million budget item for the bus workers, a fraction of the \$400 million that the city is saving by cutting the EPP. Only about half of the money has been used by bus companies to rehire veteran drivers. Only one company, Reliant, is using the funds, and it refuses to pay drivers overtime. At least two or three thousand laid off workers are still unable to get jobs.

In October of last year Members for Change, an opposition slate in the union, organized a rally in front of City Hall to deliver a petition to the mayor demanding that laid off workers be included in the upcoming "master pick" to fill open positions based on established seniority. No representative from de Blasio came out to meet the demonstrators, but that did not discourage the leaders of Members for Change from exhorting the bus workers to "keep agitating" with de Blasio and New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo, also a Democrat.

The Members for Change slate has also appealed for support from the Federal government, and US Labor Secretary Thomas Perez is now suing to nullify the results of the last union election, which the Cordiello faction won.

The plan to destroy the rights of bus workers was first made public in a document of Cuomo's Education Reform Commission, which is made up of billionaires, charter school operators and, significantly, Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers and former president of the United Federation of Teachers, representing more than 100,000 teachers and paraprofessionals in New York City.

In a 2012 report, the Commission noted the need to reduce "the biggest cost drivers in education and areas where spending exceeds the rate of inflation, including special education, transportation, pension and benefits." Several times, the report emphasized the need to "Identify ways to reduce transportation costs..."

In the last few years, conditions for the entire working class in New York City have deteriorated. Not only is the city rife with police violence, but new figures show that the cost of living has increased 20 percent in the last five years. The homeless population now tops 60,000, and the poverty rate has climbed steadily upwards, due, in part, to the conditions of unemployment and slave wages to which bus workers and former bus workers have been reduced.

Many school bus workers, aware that their enemies are not only in the corporate offices but also in the White House, City Hall and the union headquarters, have asked, "What do we do now?"

At the end of the strike two years ago, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party sought to address this question. We believe that these issues have become even more urgent today:

"In the face of the offensive to wipe out every social right won over a century of struggle, the working class must advance its own political strategy. This is not the election of more big-business politicians but mobilization of the united strength of the working class through new organizations of industrial and political struggle, independent of the bought-and-paid-for trade unions and Democratic Party politicians. The aim of this movement must be the establishment of a workers' government, ending the rule of the financial oligarchy, and the reorganization of economic life to meet human needs, not private profit.

"... The lessons of this betrayal must be assimilated. Above all, it has demonstrated the burning need for a new leadership in the working class. From the outset of this strike, only the World Socialist Web Site and the Socialist Equality Party provided a voice for the workers and a way forward in their struggle.

"The SEP calls on school bus workers and all those who have supported their struggle to join in the task of building the new leadership that is required and arming the coming struggles with a revolutionary program and perspective. We urge you to contact us here."



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact