

New York City school bus workers authorize strike action

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Bus drivers and attendants in New York City, determined to resist the assault on their wages and benefits, voted in recent weeks to authorize strike action against two school bus contractors.

The authorization votes were approved a week ago by 94 percent of workers at Pioneer Transportation Corporation and a month ago by 96 percent at Consolidated Bus Transit, which includes the companies of Boro Transit, SNT, and ANJ. Together the companies employ more than 1,800 workers out of a total school bus workforce of nearly 9,000.

The overwhelming approval of strike action, less than two years after a month-long work stoppage, reflects immense anger among workers over devastating givebacks, including cuts to health care, elimination of holiday pay and revised work rules to effectively force overtime without additional pay.

School bus companies pushed through these cuts in the aftermath of the 2013 strike, abetted by the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181. The union was forced to call a strike in response to mass opposition to then-mayor Michael Bloomberg's plan to eliminate job protections for workers (known as Employee Protection Provisions, or EPP) and open up school bus routes to the lowest bidder.

During the strike Local 1181 worked systematically to isolate bus workers from their allies in the municipal workforce, where 300,000 teachers, transit workers and others labored without a contract. They called workers back to the job on the basis of a pledge by the leading Democratic mayoral candidates, including the current resident of City Hall, Bill de Blasio, to "revisit" the issue of job protections at some unspecified time in the future. The pledge by the Democrats also stressed fiscal responsibility, a pledge to drive down the cost of labor for transporting school children.

In the aftermath of the strike, two rounds of competitive bidding were held without the job protections of the EPP, affecting roughly half of the school bus workers. Thousands of drivers and attendants on these routes were laid off, while others were forced to accept pay cuts of up to half of their previous salaries. According to the latest tally by the union, more than 2,100 school bus workers remain jobless.

The third and final round of competitive bidding, initially scheduled for this past spring, was delayed by Mayor de Blasio. After opening up the bid competition, the administration backtracked in the face of an uproar by workers, who learned of the news from the *World Socialist Web Site* (See "New York City mayor bids out final school bus routes without job protections"). De Blasio subsequently extended by two to three years the contracts for Consolidated, Pioneer and other companies that operate the third set of routes.

Prior to the delay, the companies collaborated with the union to push through concessions. The unions argued that without huge cuts the companies would lose out in the bidding competition, and drivers and attendants would be out of a job. However, now that the competition has been delayed, the companies have refused to restore any of the givebacks.

The prospects for and timing of a potential strike remain unclear. The union is giving workers virtually no information about negotiations. Drivers at Consolidated complained to the WSWs last week of the lack of communication, echoing widespread sentiment during and after the 2013 strike.

What is clear is that rather than mobilizing the entire workforce, the union intends to further isolate school bus workers by targeting only specific companies. After the 2013 strike, Local 1181 scrapped the longstanding

practice of one master contract for the entire industry and instead negotiated agreements on a company-by-company basis. This facilitated wage cutting by allowing companies to pit workers against each other.

By demonstrating an ability to impose cuts on its members, Local 1181 hopes to convince the Democratic mayor to reach a deal on some form of job protections. The city would get cost savings on bus routes, while the union would maintain its dues stream to fund their bloated salaries. The president of the local, Michael Cordiello, reported income for fiscal year 2015 of approximately \$225,000. Twelve other officials pulled in more than \$100,000 for the year. While this parasitic layer of union bureaucrats has avoided any discomfort following the 2013 strike, the income and benefits of the membership has plummeted.

The strategy of Local 1181 to secure its own interests is repeated by other unions throughout the country. The integration of the unions into the structure of corporate management, along with a political alliance with the Democratic Party, is connected to the drive to impose austerity contracts while dissipating or suppressing opposition. This process has accelerated under the Obama administration, with virtually all of the income gains going to the top one percent. Jobs that once offered a modicum of income stability have been uprooted to make way for temporary, low wage work.

In New York City, the ATU is adamantly opposed to any action that would undermine Mayor de Blasio. Any serious counteroffensive of workers would cause major disruptions in the city and necessitate a political challenge to the Democrats.

Local 1181 strongly supported de Blasio's candidacy and continues to promote illusions that the Democrats will come to the rescue, despite a year and a half without the restoration of EPP, with thousands remaining unemployed and with the entire workforce suffering significant cuts. One 28-year veteran at Consolidated remarked, "When de Blasio was campaigning he promised to come through. He said vote for me, vote for me. And we did. But now what has he actually done for us? Nada."

The critical task facing school bus workers is to understand the lessons not only of the past two years within the school bus industry, but of the experience of their class as a whole. The increasing polarization of society into the super wealthy and the impoverished

working class is generating a growing sentiment among workers to fight back. Yet no serious struggle is possible without first breaking free of the union straitjacket and the political subordination to the Democratic Party.



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