Seattle, Washington school bus drivers launch one-day strike

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Several hundred school bus drivers walked out Wednesday morning in Seattle, Washington after transportation giant First Student unilaterally imposed its “last, best and final” contract offer. The Seattle public school system, with nearly 54,000 students, is the largest district in Washington state and roughly 12,000 of its students rely on the yellow buses for transport.

There was a high level of tension on the picket line Wednesday morning when a strikebreaker attempted to drive out of a bus yard. Completely ignoring picketers’ safety, the bus forced its way out of the lot and struck several picketers, although fortunately none of the workers were seriously injured.

First Student is a branch of United Kingdom-based conglomerate First Group, which was established through the privatization of nationalized and municipal bus operators during the Margaret Thatcher years. After buying up Laidlaw, the company became the largest provider of school buses in the United States. There are currently a series of strikes by bus drivers in Manchester and other UK cities at companies owned by First Group, which also owns Greyhound, the largest provider of bus service in North America.

First Student and International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) Local 174 have been in negotiations since June. In the 2016 contract agreement, the Teamsters agreed to defer negotiations on health and retirement issues until First Student secured its contract to provide services to the Seattle Public Schools, which occurred this year.

The 2016 contract obtained minimal job protection and wage increases for the drivers, with a new pay range of from $18 to $24.40. Given Seattle’s rapidly escalating housing costs, and rental costs reported in 2016 to be rising four times faster than the national average, the new wage scale was not even a drop in the bucket. In 2016, typical rents in the Seattle area surpassed $2,000 a month, up 9.7 percent over the previous year, the highest rise in the nation. A year later, average rents are now $2,181 monthly.

The drivers are angry over First Student’s refusal to provide any but the most minimal health care benefits, and only to drivers who work more than 30 hours a week. They are not only fighting the corporate owners but also the Democratic Party-controlled Seattle School Board (SSB), which, in its contract with First Student, refused to broaden health coverage to drivers working between 20 and 30 hours per week. It wrote, “Unfortunately, the pass-through cost for the District to broaden First Student’s bus driver participation in healthcare coverage is cost prohibitive, especially when the District is facing a $74 million dollar shortfall.”

According to the union, “First Student provides the bare minimum required by the ACA [Affordable Care Act]. This means for over 400 drivers, only 26 of them both qualified and could afford to purchase healthcare available.” The only “affordable” plan offered by the company restricted coverage to seeing a doctor to diagnose an illness. Any subsequent follow up had to be paid out of pocket. Hospitalization, under those conditions, would be prohibitive if not impossible.

That only 26 out of 400 “insured” workers were able to obtain health coverage vindicates the warning by the *World Socialist Web Site* as early as 2009, that the Obama administration’s health care “reform” established a framework for the insurers, the corporations and the government to drastically reduce the health benefits available to low- and middle-income individuals and families. “The aim is to limit the amount that the government must pay out for health care and Social Security payments, as well as what

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corporations must pay in pensions and other retirement benefits," the WSWS wrote.

Local 174 released letters, obtained under a Freedom of Information request, from the school board and from Democratic Mayor Tim Burgess to First Student ostensibly placing the responsibility for any strike on the company. The effort of the Democrats to posture as friends of low-income workers reeks of hypocrisy and bad faith.

The school board's letter goes out of its way to emphasize it will not provide First Student with additional funding towards paying for healthcare for its employees, as the district "has no legal obligation" to do so. Out of a budget of nearly $858 million, the SSB refused to include a measly $1.7 million in order to expand even substandard health care to the school bus drivers. In other words, First Student will have to employ a workforce with a majority without any health care coverage. In its 2015 contract struggle with Seattle teachers, it forced through an inferior wage raise in a city where two-thirds of a starting teacher's salary can be consumed simply by rent.

Mayor Burgess presides over a city with a poverty level of 13.5 percent, where gentrification has forced tens of thousands out of their homes and where the homeless crisis is accelerating with nearly 4,000 homeless, according to notoriously incomplete official counts. Meanwhile, side by side with rising misery, the Seattle area is home to two of the wealthiest men in the world, Amazon chief Jeff Bezos and Microsoft mogul Bill Gates, whose combined wealth totals nearly $190 billion. Along with Warren Buffett, these three men own as much wealth as the lower 50 percent of the US population.

The Democratic state administration has also showered aviation and defense giant Boeing with billions in corporate tax cuts while slashing state funding for school districts.

The Teamsters, which are politically allied with the Democrats, have no intention of waging a serious struggle. The union's decision to limit the strike to one day is aimed at allowing workers to let off steam and block a genuine mobilization of workers and young people in Seattle to defend workers and the right to public education. Several comments on the union local's Facebook site noted the impotency of a one-day strike. Joy White, a Seattle teacher, asked, "Why only one day? Will that be effective? We support you if you need to go longer." Many parents' comments sympathized with the bus drivers' conditions and their desire to fight back.

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