

Seattle school bus drivers reject second contract proposal by First Student

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Seattle school bus drivers employed by First Student, part of the international transport giant First Group, have been engaged in a contract fight since last June over wages, retirement and health benefits.

On January 6, the drivers, who are members of Teamsters Local 174, rejected the company's most recent contract offer by 85 percent. The deal would limit health benefits to drivers—and only to those working at least 30 hours a week—and would exclude medical coverage for family members. First Student continues to balk on making any contributions to a pension plan for the drivers.

On September 24, the 400 drivers voted for strike action by a nearly unanimous vote; however, Teamsters union officials delayed authorizing a strike until October 12. In an effort to allow angry workers to let off steam, the union called a one-day strike on November 29. The walkout was shut down despite the overwhelming support of other school employees, parents and students.

Far from rejecting the company's new takeaway demands outright, the Teamsters officials brought the deal back to the members without any recommendation, to gauge if the resistance of workers had been sufficiently worn down. After workers overwhelmingly rejected the second deal, the union officials tried to justify their treachery, writing in a note to workers, that "Local 174 does not usually put proposals to a vote of the membership unless they are recommended by Union leadership and your elected Bargaining Committee. This time we made an exception due to the extremely high stakes involved in a decision to strike."

The drivers have persevered for months in the face of the intransigence of First Student, the Democratic Party-controlled Seattle School Board, and local Democratic Party officials. The Teamsters and other unions, however, have sought to suppress any action by drivers because it could inspire broader sections of the working class to

fight the bipartisan attack on living standards and essential services like public education. Other sections of workers, including 250,000 Teamsters members at United Parcel Service have contracts expiring this year, and are eager to end decades of concessions and deteriorating working conditions.

In 2016, Teamsters Local 174 agreed to a deal that imposed substandard wages, which left drivers far behind rising expenses in the Seattle area, where the cost of living is exceeded only by New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco. The union presented as good coin a promise by First Student that it would reopen negotiations in good faith on medical benefits and pensions in 2017. Teamsters officials made the agreement, knowing full well First Student has a long record of renegeing on such worthless promises to local Teamsters unions around the country.

Seattle epitomizes the grotesque levels of social inequality that plague America and the world. Area residents like Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos and Microsoft boss Bill Gates account for over \$200 billion in wealth. At the same time, workers have faced decades of eroding living standards, and the city has seen the growth of poverty, homelessness and hunger. Under Democratic Governor Jay Inslee, Washington State voted the largest corporate tax reduction in the history of the United States—\$8.7 billion—for aviation and defense giant Boeing Co. while school funding is being slashed.

The Teamsters update to the members amounts to a threat. If drivers reject the next offer they will be forced into an indefinite strike, which, like so many over the last four decades, would be isolated by the unions and defeated, with workers losing their savings, homes, etc. The union would make a counter proposal to First Student, and if it was rejected then there would be an "extended strike, the length of which will be entirely up to First Student."

In an article published by the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative organization on January 18, “SEA Stands in Solidarity with Seattle School Bus Drivers” the organization provides cover for the Seattle Education Association, which voted to call a token one-day solidarity walkout if drivers struck. “Should the Teamsters engage in an ongoing strike, SEA members would walk out on a Wednesday during the early release time for professional development. This is after both the students and the school buses will have departed for the day so as not to impact student instructional time.”

Such an impotent stunt after students have gone home and the buses have returned to the yard is a fraud aimed at shoring up the credentials of the largely discredited unions. Socialist Alternative, whose leading member, Kshama Sawant, sits on the Seattle City Council, makes no mention of the fact that the SEA betrayed a one-week strike by teachers in 2015 and accepted a sellout deal.

The SEA and the Teamsters, along with their pseudo-left publicity agents, are politically allied to the Democratic Party, which no less than Trump and the Republicans, is waging a war against the living standards of workers and funneling resources from public education to boost the profits of private corporations like First Student.

Bus drivers must take the conduct of this struggle into their own hand by electing rank-and-file committees to establish lines of communication with workers throughout the metro Seattle area and prepare a genuine struggle by the working class against austerity and social inequality overseen by both corporate-controlled parties.

The authors recommend:

Seattle, Washington school bus drivers launch one-day strike

[30 November 2017]

Seattle teachers union calls off strike

[16 September 2015]



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