

# Seattle schoolbus drivers walk out in indefinite strike

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Some 400 school bus drivers walked off their jobs in Seattle, Washington Thursday morning, demanding improved health care and retirement benefits. Negotiations between Local 174 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and transportation giant First Student, owned by multi-national conglomerate FirstGroup, had been ongoing since last June. Union officials have asserted that the strike will continue "until a deal is reached."

Seattle Public Schools is the largest district in the state with 54,000 students, and 12,000 of the students relying on the yellow buses for transport to and from school.

School districts nationwide have increasingly contracted with private transport services as education budgets have declined. Companies like First Student provide lower-cost services by maintaining a low-paid, low-benefit workforce. First Student is the largest provider of school bus services in the US and also owns Greyhound, the largest bus service provider in the US. Scotland-based FirstGroup had revenues of £5.2 billion in 2016 (\$7.4 billion US).

Pickets were placed at the two bus lots on the south and northeast of the city. According to local news media, several buses were able to leave the yards after being delayed by pickets. The union, according to reports, had agreed to a "protocol" of stopping scabs for two minutes before allowing their departure. For its part, First Student is seeking to break the strike, offering scab drivers eight hours of pay (instead of the normal part-time split-shift pay), \$25 per diem and meals. In November, one bus forced its way through a picket line that was part of the one-day strike. Several workers were struck, fortunately none were injured. Police on bicycles and stationed in vehicles were present at Thursdays strike.

Last September 24, the drivers voted for strike action by a nearly unanimous vote; however, Teamsters union officials delayed authorizing a strike until October 12. The delay furthered until finally, in an effort to allow angry workers to let off steam, the union called a one-day strike on November 29 after the company unilaterally imposed its last, best and final offer. The union then shut down the strike despite the overwhelming support of other school employees, parents and students.

On January 6, the drivers voted down a second contract offer from First Student by an overwhelming 85 percent, with many condemning the inadequate health care provision that covered only the driver—and only those working at least 30 hours a week. Family members could be added, but with such high premiums that it was effectively inaccessible. Teamsters spokesperson Jamie Fleming explained, "We're talking \$1,700 a month for people who make \$2,000 a month". According to the union's web site the offer "included nothing in the way of retirement benefits."

Local 174 officials brought a completely unsatisfactory offer to a second vote, meanwhile attempting to posture as neutral by refusing to recommend or reject the package. The union admitted, "First Student's most recent proposal was essentially a reimagining of the same proposal the drivers had already rejected, with the addition of one piece that would benefit a mere 22 out of the over 400 bus drivers in the group." Union officials sought this action as a way to gauge the level of resistance of the rank-and-file after nearly seven months of negotiations, if they had been sufficiently worn down.

Attempting to cover for this treachery, union officials wrote in a note to workers, "Local 174 does not usually put proposals to a vote of the membership unless they

are recommended by the 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.”

In an interview with *The Stranger* Thursday morning, bus driver Beverly Callaway, with 18 years at the company, said, "I've been sick twice this winter and I haven't been able to seek good medical care early enough. I've had to wait for either a little bit of extra money on my paycheck, scrimp and save, or let something go. It's pretty much devastating." Several workers pointed out the conundrum they face, earning too much to qualify for subsidies under the Affordable Care Act and yet not enough to pay for the company-provided health insurance. Only 26 employees out of 400 drivers qualified for the company's health care plan. This shows how former President Obama, with the support of the Democratic Party, has, through the ACA “reform” effectively shifted the burden of health care costs from the corporations and government onto the backs of the working class.

As with the November 29 one-day strike, postings on the union's Facebook page have been extremely positive. One parent wrote, "I am an SPS mom. Can we come bring treats or picket w you like we did for the teachers' strike?"

Seattle teachers, who face contract negotiations this year, voted by 93 percent to walk out in defense of the bus drivers. However, the Seattle Education Association, with the support of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization and Socialist Alternative (whose leading member, Kshama Sawant, is a city councilmember), had ensured beforehand the ineffectiveness of such a protest by scheduling it to take place after students have early dismissal.

The Democratic Party-dominated Seattle Public School board set this conflict into motion when it refused to vote money in the current budget to fund health care for First Student employees. Local 174 had agreed to schedule a contract reopening in 2017, after the school budget vote, accepting as good coin First Student's claim that the school board would support budgeting for health care costs. On the contrary, the school board went out of its way to communicate that it “has no legal obligation” to do so. There was no effort by First Student, as the only applicant bidding to provide transport services, to force the issue.

Bus drivers cannot depend on the union to lead a serious struggle. Local 174's efforts have been to delay and avoid an all-out strike that would undermine their alliance with the Democratic Party. A protracted strike would inevitably provoke a political conflict with the Democratic Party, which controls the government at the school, city and state level. The role of the Democratic Party, just as the Republican Party, is to defend the capitalist system along with the obscene levels of wealth controlled by individuals such as Seattle-area residents Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates. Rank-and-file committees must be built to take the struggle out of the hands of the union and to reach out to the working class in Seattle, teachers and youth for widespread industrial action. This requires the building of a new political leadership based on an internationalist and socialist perspective.



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