

Seattle, Washington school bus drivers enter second week of strike

Hector Cordon
9 February 2018

Around 400 Seattle school bus drivers are continuing a strike against transport giant First Student that began February 1. Negotiations resumed Thursday for the first time since the strike began under the auspices of a federal mediator.

First Student's press release indicated that it was not planning to improve its position on health care and retirement. The company wrote that it would meet with the mediator and the union "with the hope that the union will bring our health care and retirement package to its members for a vote."

For its part Teamsters Local 174 took no note of First Student's arrogant pronouncement, issuing a statement declaring, "[F]irst Student has finally reached out to the Teamsters and a meeting will be taking place tomorrow, February 8, 2018. We are hopeful that this meeting will bring us closer to a resolution to this strike."

First Student is part of First Transit, the North American division of Scotland-based FirstGroup, which had revenues of over \$7 billion in 2016. It offers budget-strapped school districts cheap student transportation based on a low-wage, low-benefit workforce. Licking its lips, First Student boasts, "We are the market leader in this \$25 billion marketplace, of which only 38 percent is currently operated by the private sector."

Seattle Public Schools (SPS), the largest school district in Washington state with 56,000 students, pays First Student \$27 million per year based on a three-year contract to transport 12,000 of its students to and from school daily.

Local 174 and the company had agreed to a contract last year with plans to reopen negotiations based on First Student's promise to seek health benefits and retirement funding from the SPS board after it had

finalized its two-year budget for 2017-2018. However, the Democratic Party-dominated school board refused this request, emphasizing that it "has no legal obligation" to do so.

Drivers, determined to gain health care and retirement benefits, voted overwhelmingly in September in support of a strike. Out of the 400 drivers only 26 members of the workforce, composed largely of part-time employees, were eligible for health coverage. Drivers interviewed by the local news media reported finding themselves making too much money to qualify for subsidies under Obamacare while not earning enough to pay for the employer-provided plan.

First Student has sought to break the strike by offering strikebreakers eight hours' pay (instead of the standard part-time, split-shift), \$50 per diem, originally \$25, and meals. It claims to have 50 buses in service, covering one-third of all bus routes.

Since negotiations reopened in July of 2017 Local 174 officials have directed their efforts to wearing down the rank and file. After the September 24 vote to strike, the union delayed strike authorization until October 12. A one-day strike at the end of November was called only after the company had imposed its "last, best and final offer". This token action had no impact, as First Student refused to budge from its regressive contract demands. In reality, the walkout was intended as a stunt to allow workers to blow off steam at the same time signaling that the union would not seriously challenge First Student's demands.

Union officials reluctantly called an indefinite strike three weeks after the drivers rejected a second contract offer from First Student, on January 6, by a substantial margin of 85 percent. That contract offer—virtually unchanged from the original—was submitted for a vote with union officials refusing to make any

recommendation for or against.

The union hoped that adopting a position of neutrality would act to deflect criticism from the membership for presenting them with a second inferior contract offer. Seeking to explain this sellout, union officials wrote, “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.”

Despite the recognition of the Teamsters as the nationwide bargaining agent for First Student’s approximately 40,000 drivers in the US (with some exceptions) the union has consistently isolated every struggle by the drivers. The day that Seattle school bus drivers walked out, Teamsters Local 572 in Southern California ended a two-week strike by school bus drivers there for better pay and health benefits, a guaranteed hourly pay rate and safer working conditions. Their contract had expired last August.

Instead of coordinating the two strikes in order to deliver a heavier blow to First Student, or even reaching out to wider layers of school teachers and employees who face deteriorating pay and benefits and harsher working conditions, the union ordered Southern California bus drivers back to work on February 1 on the basis, according to union President Dennis Watson, that “[t]he company has given a verbal and contractual commitment that they will move to remedy … anything of concern with regards to drivers’ working conditions.” No mention was made in this terse one-sentence statement about the workers’ demands for improved wages and health care benefits.

A search of Local 572’s web site failed to locate any mention of their recently ended bus drivers strike or the results of the two-week walkout. The last update on their “News” tab comes from October of 2017. However, their Political Action tab had an extensive list of “candidate recommendations”, dominated by Democratic Party operatives, from the presidency down to local school boards—the same school boards that have repeatedly voted to privatize school transportation services.

Seeking to provide a cover for the isolation of the strike by the unions, the Seattle Education Association (SEA) organized a token walkout by teachers, supported by the pseudo-left International Socialist

Organization and Socialist Alternative—whose leading member, Kshama Sawant, is a Seattle City Council member—ostensibly in support of the drivers. Indicating their solidarity with the drivers and a desire for a militant struggle against their own work conditions, teachers voted by 93 percent for this action. However, the SEA absurdly scheduled the action for an early release day, with teachers not walking out until students had already gone home for the afternoon.

Meanwhile, Sawant has attempted to promote illusions in the Democratic controlled Seattle School Board, posting a letter to the superintendent stating her readiness to support the board if it “fought establishment politicians in [the state capital of] Olympia.” This, as though the board was not part and parcel of the same right-wing, anti-working-class Democratic political establishment that dominates Washington state.

School bus drivers can only advance their struggle through a break with the Teamsters and its alliance with the big-business Democratic Party. This requires the formation of a rank-and-file committee led by trusted workers, seeking to mobilize broader industrial action in support of the drivers. This fight must be animated by a socialist program in defense of the basic social rights of the working class such as access to free and universal health care and high-quality, public education for all. Workers interested in conducting such a fight are encouraged to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and sign up for the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter*.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact