

Five years since New York City school bus strike

Philip Guelpa
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Last month marked the fifth anniversary of the betrayal of the one-month-long strike by nearly 9,000 New York City school bus drivers, attendants, and mechanics against the private companies that contract with the city to provide transportation for over 150,000 students. The strike was provoked by billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg, whose ripping up of the Employee Protection Provision (EPP) threatened workers with devastating economic losses.

EPP, in place for over four decades and successfully defended in a 16-week strike in 1979, guaranteed these workers continuity in seniority, wages and benefits, regardless of which private contractor employed them. The attack on the school bus workers was directed against public education itself. Bloomberg's effort to substantially cut costs was part of an ongoing nationwide strategy of the financial and corporate elites to make the working class pay for the 2008 financial crash and the multi-trillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street.

The strike, coming after the unions had long been transformed into a labor police force to suppress the class struggle on behalf of the ruling class, expressed the determination of the whole working class to oppose austerity and defend their living standards. The strike generated popular support from millions of workers struggling each day to pay their bills in one of the most socially polarized cities in the world. This is why the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181, and the rest of the city employee unions, including the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), did everything they could to isolate and defeat the strike before it could become the catalyst for a far greater movement of the working class.

The *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) was the only news source telling the truth about the struggle, in print or online. The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned workers about the treachery of the ATU and other unions, and exposed the role of all factions of the capitalist political establishment, especially the dominant Democratic Party politicians in New York City.

Our reporters and supporters became well known on the picket lines. We spoke with hundreds of strikers and posted dozens of articles that allowed workers to express their views and communicate with one another, while the union and the capitalist media shut them out.

Of central importance was the call by the WSWS and the SEP for workers to break from the ATU and form a rank-and-file committee to take the leadership of the struggle and reach out for support from all sections of the working class. Five years later, in the context of the recent West Virginia teachers' struggle and unmistakable signs of growing class struggle internationally, the record of the school bus strike is a crucial one.

On January 16, 2013, as the strike was about to begin, the WSWS posted a statement by the SEP entitled "Mobilize the working class to

support New York's school bus drivers!" In it, the SEP warned about the role of the ATU and AFL-CIO as a whole, and advanced a clear policy:

Bus drivers must be conscious that the Amalgamated Transit Union has its own interests, which are distinct from those of the workers. To secure its dues base, the union would be perfectly willing to sell out the workers. And the unions reject any effort to mobilize the working class in a united struggle.

If it is to be successful, the bus drivers' strike must become the starting point for a broader industrial and political offensive of the working class. This requires that the conduct of the strike be taken out of the hands of the union through the formation of independent rank-and-file committees.

This assessment was confirmed at every stage of the struggle. In the face of threats of scabs, court injunctions, loss of medical coverage, and repeated offers of major concessions by the union, the workers refused to give in. There was an unbridgeable gulf between their determination and the rotten role of the ATU.

The call for the formation of an independent rank-and-file committee, in opposition to the ATU bureaucracy, met with a response from a group of school bus workers who turned to the SEP for assistance and political insight. The WSWS fought for an alternative socialist strategy, based on reaching out to other sections of the working class, such as teachers and transit workers, but also immigrant workers, the lowest-paid, the unemployed and the youth. A common struggle against the corporate and political establishment, the SEP insisted, had to be waged as a conscious political battle, based on a break with the parties of the ruling class and the fight for a socialist program to defend jobs, education and all basic rights.

The full force of the ruling class, including a smear campaign in the capitalist press ("Why the New York Times backs Bloomberg's assault on school bus drivers"), was brought to bear against the workers. Mayor Bloomberg repeatedly rejected the union's groveling offers of major concessions, insisting that only total capitulation, i.e., elimination of the EPP, would be accepted.

At the same time, the ATU and other unions did everything in their power to isolate and wear down the workers, despite growing support among broad sections of the city's working class, including among parents. The WSWS wrote at the time, "The school bus workers and all sections of the working class must draw the lessons of the last four weeks of struggle. Right now the ATU, working in the closest collaboration with other unions, is doing everything possible to keep the strike isolated, to starve the workers back to work as they dole out a pitiful \$150 a week in strike benefits, and to plead with Bloomberg for a deal that will send the strikers back without winning their

demands, while they negotiate ‘cost savings’ that will make the workers pay for the city’s fiscal crisis.

“If workers wait for the unions to conduct a struggle they will wait until they have been defeated,” we warned. “It is necessary for the school bus strikers to act independently of the union hierarchy, to reach out to transit workers, teachers and other city workers. It is necessary for transit workers, teachers and others to likewise take independent action in opposition to the treachery of the pro-capitalist and pro-Democratic Party organizations whose main task is to prevent strikers or to strangle them if they cannot be prevented.”

The rank-and-file committee initiated by the SEP held several meetings where school bus drivers discussed and debated the most crucial political and strategic issues, including the objective causes for the transformation of the unions into direct tools of the corporations and the government, and why they couldn’t be reformed simply by changing the leadership.

Also discussed was why appeals to the Democrats, whether it was Obama, Governor Cuomo or the candidates in the upcoming mayoral election, were fruitless and self-defeating. Instead the committee issued calls to other city workers being forced by the unions to work years without new contracts, including sanitation workers, firefighters and teachers, to join in a common struggle.

The betrayal by the ATU was based on an empty promise from the Democratic mayoral candidates that whoever won in that year’s election would seek to “revisit” the EPP. The Democrats’ statement, echoing Bloomberg, emphasized the need for fiscal responsibility (i.e., driving down labor costs). In the subsequent five years, under Mayor de Blasio and Cuomo, the EPP has not been reinstated.

Among the concessions in the deal that ended the strike, instead of a blanket agreement applicable to all school bus companies with city contracts, was an agreement by the union to separate contracts with the individual firms, thereby opening up the opportunity to divide and weaken workers’ ability to resist cost cutting and attrition.

The rank-and-file committee issued a leaflet calling on drivers to reject the blackmail deal. Having isolated the strikers for a month, however, the ATU was able to get the sellout through.

During the intervening years, conditions have substantially worsened. Thousands lost their jobs. Some were rehired at much lower pay. Others were simply replaced by inexperienced newcomers at wages half of what had been standard, and with few or no benefits. Competition between companies, based on low-bid contracting by the city, has resulted in significant consolidation, as companies closed, merged, or merely changed their names. This process has been associated with repeated attacks on workers’ pay and benefits.

For its part, the ATU has continued to peddle the lie that the EPP can be won back by pressuring the big business politicians, especially de Blasio. Far from winning workers’ basic demands, the ATU is seeking a deal that would amount to additional concessions on working conditions and living standards.

De Blasio, seeking to provide a fig leaf for his union backers, first announced a subsidy to the companies from city funds, which partly compensated for the precipitous decline in pay suffered by some veteran workers. This boosted corporate profits but has done nothing to address the losses experienced by workers, not only in wages, but in job security, benefits, and speedup.

This charade has continued for years. The latest attempt to deceive the school bus workers and cover up the 2013 betrayal is the announcement of so-called “Experienced School Bus Worker Provisions,” advertised as a restoration of the EPP.

In actuality this applies primarily to drivers and attendants who were employed prior to the 2013 strike, amounting to only about 23 percent and 18 percent, respectively, of the currently active workforce, according to the Department of Education. Furthermore, only those workers employed as of June 30, 2018 or thereafter and those laid off in the course of the contracts expiring on that date will be included in “pick lists.” All those who lost their jobs under earlier contracts are excluded.

Workers will be eligible for the highest rate of pay that they have earned since June 30, 2010. All those who were hired at significantly lower rates following the 2013 strike are stuck at the lower wages. This deal, in effect, codifies the two-tier pay structure that has become widespread in many industries and areas of the economy since the 2008 crisis. The latest proposals, far from winning back the workers’ basic rights, are a blatant attempt to divide older from younger workers.

The defeat of the 2013 strike was painful but it contains critical lesson for school bus workers and the working class as a whole. The example of the rank-and-file committee established by a group of workers was an initial but significant step pointing the way forward. Five years later, the rebellion of the West Virginia teachers, which temporarily broke free from the grip of the anti-working-class unions, once again confirmed the necessity of building new organizations, controlled by and answerable to rank-and-file workers. These committees, elected in every workplace, must fight to overcome the divisions used to weaken the working class and unite every battle into a common struggle to assert the social rights of workers to secure and good-paying jobs, health care and pensions, and fully funded social services.

To attain these social rights the working class must be politically organized in opposition to both corporate-controlled parties and the capitalist profit system they defend, and guided by a socialist perspective aimed at reorganizing society to meet human needs, not the profits of the corporations and Wall Street banks.



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