

Georgia school bus drivers face discipline after mounting sickout-action over pay and benefits

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School bus drivers in Georgia's Dekalb County school system are facing retaliation after staging a "sickout" strike for 3 consecutive workdays beginning Thursday, April 19 over pay and benefits. To date, eight workers have been fired in relation to the action, organized in defiance of the state's reactionary anti-strike laws.

The struggle erupted in the midst of a nationwide wave of teachers strikes and reflects the intolerable conditions facing wide layers of school employees. Dekalb County, which comprises mostly suburban areas of Atlanta, has the third-largest school district in Georgia with about 102,000 children attending its 137 schools.

On the first day of the sickout over 45 percent of the district's 900 drivers called in sick, with about 30 percent on Friday and fewer on Monday, the last day of the announced action. The bus drivers were impelled to take this stand after the highly-paid school superintendent, Stephen Green, displayed open contempt and disrespect towards the drivers when they complained about their abysmal pay, lack of benefits, overcrowded buses and numerous other daily hardships in the course of a series of meetings.

The drivers are about the lowest-paid employees in the school district, earning close to starvation wages. The starting pay for a new hire can be less than \$1,500 per month with perhaps a two percent pay raise per year. On top of that the drivers are classified as part time employees since their official work time is six hours a day.

A veteran bus driver, who was accused of participating in the sickout and fired despite being genuinely sick that day, informed this writer that after

having worked for over 10 years her federal W-2 tax form for 2017 listed \$21,000 as her pre-tax gross pay. A significant number of bus drivers, despite having a "regular" job, are eligible for US government food stamps that assist people with low incomes.

In addition to earning slave wages, the drivers receive a miserly pension plan. The same victimized worker said that if she retired now she would receive \$105 as her monthly pension benefit. Another worker who she knows retired after 36 years of service and receives around \$220 per month. The drivers, whose day begins around 4 AM, endure a grueling work schedule facing overcrowded buses, longer and longer routes and to add insult to injury a disrespectful and contemptuous attitude from the top leadership of the school administration.

The victimized driver pointed out that Superintendent Green understands nothing about what a bus driver does during the workday and has stated openly that his role is to cut budgets.

Despite the limited character of the driver's action, Green reacted with seething anger and intolerance, firing eight drivers immediately. Many of those fired insisted that were not even participating in the sickout and had discussed their sickness with their immediate supervisors.

Green also cynically claimed that DeKalb school bus drivers are among the highest paid in the region.

During a press conference he held on the first day of the sickout, Green accused the drivers of putting "children in danger". This is a bit rich coming from an overlord who was hired in July 2015 to preside over a school district where numerous problems in many school buildings such as roof leaks, air-conditioning

and heating system-breakdown and dilapidated bathrooms have remained unrepaired for years.

Green then sternly lectured the workers that they had no right to protest since as “public employees” state law forbids them to “promote, encourage, or participate in any strike.” The state of Georgia is well known for its notoriously regressive laws, all squarely directed against the working class. It is no exaggeration to say that workers in the state essentially do not possess any meaningful enforceable rights against employers. Historically the state has nurtured and harbored a class of reactionary and disgracefully backward politicians.

A veteran driver, Melanie Douglas, who has worked for 12 years for the school system, described to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* the arbitrary way she was terminated. She said that in the late evening on the first day she received a call and was bluntly informed without giving a reason that her job had been terminated.

Melanie commented: “It [being sick] was not a reason given for termination. He just told me ‘Dr. Green has terminated your job’. I’ve been out one day.” Continuing incredulously, Melanie said: “You’re going to terminate my job with no rhyme or reason?”

It is more than likely that Green, a financial hatchetman for the school district and the state, took this opportunity to reduce the number of drivers in order to increase the “efficiency” of the already bare bones school transportation budget.

Bus drivers and their supporters held a press conference on the morning of Thursday, April 26 in front of Green’s office to demand that the fired workers be hired back. They insisted that Green had no right to fire the bus drivers without obtaining the approval of the entire school board. So far, the drivers appeal for reinstatement has been ignored.

Since 2003, Georgia has carried out some of the steepest cuts to education in the US, with especially brutal cuts following the onset of the financial crisis in 2008. According to a 2016 report released by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Georgia imposed the fourth-largest cut in per-student funding between 2008 and 2014. This was exceeded only by Arizona, where teachers are currently on strike, and Alabama and Idaho.

Total cuts since 2003 now amount to \$9.2 billion. While previously the state would fund about 50 percent

of a school district’s transportation expenses, it is now estimated the state funds only 15 percent.

The state’s austerity education budget on top of federal education cuts have impacted every school district, resulting in overcrowded schools, longer bus routes and steep cuts in pay for teachers, bus drivers and others who are the life-blood of the school system.

Superintendent Green, who is black, personifies a thoroughly corrupt upper-middle-class black elite who feel nothing but contempt for the largely African-American workforce he oversees.

Green was hired into the crisis-ridden school system in July 2015. His base pay is \$300,000 per year with other substantial perks such as a \$2,600 monthly expense budget, \$750 a month for transportation expenses, \$24,000 a year toward his retirement plan and a \$15,000 annual bonus for each year he’s retained as the superintendent.

Despite the relatively modest character of the bus drivers’ job action, their protest is nevertheless courageous and significant in that workers organized the action independently and in defiance of anti-strike laws. It appears only a matter of time before teachers and other school employees in Georgia follow the drivers’ example.



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