

Dekalb County Georgia school bus drivers continue fight for reinstatement of fired colleagues

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School bus drivers in Georgia's Dekalb County, encompassing the eastern suburbs of Atlanta, are continuing to press for the reinstatement of six colleagues who were vindictively fired by school superintendent Stephen Green in April. Green, who was appointed to this job in 2015 with an annual salary of \$300,000 and with an additional \$40,000 in "expenses," fired seven bus drivers after a sizeable section of them staged a three-day sickout strike commencing April 19.

On May 14, about a dozen bus drivers and their supporters, including some parents, attended a school board meeting to demand that the fired bus drivers be rehired. Without any explanation Green announced the reinstatement of only one of the seven victimized drivers. The name of the reinstated driver has been deliberately kept secret and the school system has refused to divulge any further information on the rationale for limiting the reinstatement to this one specific person. This, despite the fact that all seven victimized drivers were ostensibly fired for being the "ring-leaders" of the April sickout.

Green, however, behaved in a typically arrogant manner at the meeting, declaring "that will not be happening" in relation to the reinstatement of the six other terminated drivers. In order to further cow the workers, after hearing that some drivers were discussing another sickout, Green warned that that such an action "would be unwise".

One of the parents who intervened on behalf of the bus drivers was so shocked by the disrespect displayed by Green and the school management towards the drivers that she said, "I can't imagine working for someone for so long and being treated like this."

On Saturday May 19, school bus drivers and some of their supporters held a small demonstration in front of the Georgia State Capitol demanding reinstatement. Although the number of drivers who participated in the rally was less than anticipated, the organizers vowed to continue their struggle and organize another larger demonstration in the near future. This in turn requires the bus drivers establish links with their natural allies, the teachers who have been hard hit by year after year of cuts to the education budgets.

One of the drivers, Peter, told how difficult their jobs have become. The drivers, he said, have to start their day at 4 am and the routes have become much longer because the number of buses in the school systems has been reduced drastically due to budget cuts.

Many children who are first to be picked up have to wake up early in the morning to catch the bus. The resulting overcrowding at times leads to children fighting with each other, imposing a further burden upon bus drivers.

Peter noted that those overseeing bus transportation, from superintendent Green on down, have no clue about what it takes to be a bus driver and ridiculed the idea that they could impose themselves as managers.

Bus drivers organized the sickout action in April after their repeated appeals to management for a small pay raise, better benefits and respectful treatment fell on deaf ears. The bus drivers have gone without a real pay raise for at least a decade as a direct result of steep and unrelenting budget cuts by both the state government and the county school system.

Their spontaneous action infuriated the highly paid superintendent who declared the workers action an "illegal" defiance of his authority. He responded by

attempting to “teach them a lesson” by firing those he claimed were the ringleaders.

So low are the wages of these school bus drivers that one of the victimized drivers with 10 years of service made a mere \$21,000 in 2017. Numerous bus drivers are unable to survive off their paychecks alone and supplement their income by relying upon US government food stamps.

Reflecting the prevailing frustration and militant mood among the drivers, one of the bus drivers John Crear, told Fox News, “I didn’t participate in the [April] sick out, but if it means having another sickout to get these guys their jobs back, then let me say it now that I will be a part of that one.”

The state uses an annual funding formula to determine the funds a school district is to be allocated from the budget. However, since 2003 the state legislature has consistently appropriated far less funds than mandated by the formula.

From 2010 to 2014, for instance, the difference between what was actually allocated and the formula amount was \$1 billion each year. Since 2003, it is estimated that the total reduction to the state education budget amounts to a massive \$9.2 billion.

To cope with such huge budget cuts school system administrators have reduced the number of school days, furloughed teachers and staff, eliminated numerous teaching positions and eliminated or vastly reduced the teaching of art, music and other such programs. This has in turn led to larger and larger class size for each teacher.

Thus, every worker in the school system, including teachers, bus drivers, support staff and cafeteria workers, not to speak of students, have been severely impacted by the budget cuts which in turn have led to drastic deterioration in the quality of education. This has been seized upon by the ruling elite to intensify its drive for the privatization of public education, the promotion of “charter schools” or providing “school choice,” that is making available tax credits to parents who send their children to private schools.

The struggle by Dekalb bus drivers is part of a broader movement of teachers and school employees that has seen statewide walkouts in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and Kentucky. Bus drivers must fight to link their struggle with teachers and other sections of workers in a common fight back against the

ongoing assault on public education being carried out by both big business parties.



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