

14,000 New York City school bus workers face furlough as city imposes cuts

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More than 14,000 New York City school bus drivers, attendants and mechanics are being furloughed by the private companies that employ them. This will leave these already poorly paid workers not only without incomes, but deprived of medical insurance and pensions at a time when the city's population is reeling from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although exact figures are not available, according to a union statement, a significant number of drivers have become infected and some have died.

In New York City, private bus companies under contract to the city provide transportation for public, charter and parochial school children, including many with special needs, who cannot take public buses or subways to school.

Since mid-March, when schools were closed, the buses have been idle, and the city is now refusing to pay the companies under existing contracts or to renew the contracts. Initially during the shutdown the companies had been receiving 85 percent of their contracted payments under a provision of the existing agreements covering suspension of service during emergencies such as blizzards. The city's Department of Education (DOE) was supposed to vote on an emergency extension of these payments on April 29, but the item was pulled from the agenda at the last minute.

While the contract extension is supposedly still under review, the companies began to terminate pay and benefits to their employees the next day. The loss of these jobs will throw thousands more onto the city's already staggering unemployment rolls (already officially at 900,000) and deprive them of medical insurance when it is most needed. Some are in danger of losing necessary certifications.

The plight of one driver, Mylda Eugene, was described by the *Daily News*. Mylda, who for 17 years had driven school buses for Hoyt Transportation, lost her husband, a cab driver, to COVID-19 in late March. She has now lost both her job and her health insurance. The couple's 12-year-old twins have tested positive for the coronavirus. Mylda told the *Daily News*, "I don't know what I'm going to do right now. I was using my check to pay my rent." Thousands of

furloughed school bus workers and their families are facing similar devastation.

The city blamed the state for cutting off the 44 percent share of transportation costs it usually provides to the city. New York City projects a budget deficit of more than \$7 billion. Mayor de Blasio, a Democrat, has proposed a more than \$800 million reduction to the DOE's budget.

With hundreds dying daily from COVID-19 in New York state and around 1,000 new cases daily, Democratic New York Governor Andrew Cuomo recently announce that all schools throughout the state would remain closed for the rest of the academic year, and possibly beyond. Huge cuts in the state budget, including aid to local schools, will put additional financial pressure on the city. Cancelling the school bus contracts is only one component of the savage austerity to which the city's public schools will be subject, undoubtedly including massive job losses.

Some "community groups," such as Class Size Matters, which styles itself as "Independent voices of New York City public school parents," have urged the DOE to cancel the school bus contracts as a waste of money, oblivious to the devastating impact on school bus workers. Leonie Haimson of Class Size Matters described the payments as money "down the drain." She continued, "It's spending as though we're living in an alternative universe with unlimited funds instead of the reality of where we are with schools closed and headed towards a fiscal cliff." It should be noted that during the last school bus workers strike in 2013 the workers received major support from parents.

City Comptroller Scott Stringer agreed, "Given the extreme budgetary pressures faced by the city amid the COVID-19 pandemic, it would seem contrary to all sense of fiscal prudence that the City would continue to pay for services that can no longer be rendered for the remainder of the school year."

In the financial capital of the world, home of Wall Street, where the stock market is booming while millions of workers are being driven into destitution, the repeated refrain that "there is no money" is not only absurd, but

criminal. The broken and grossly inadequate unemployment system will in no way compensate for the loss of income due to the furlough. The Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) has announced that workers are eligible to obtain medical insurance via the state's health insurance marketplace during a "special enrollment period." The notoriously inadequate Obamacare plans, known for prohibitively expensive deductibles and copays, will drive school bus workers and their families even deeper into poverty.

Several local politicians have proposed using the school buses to transport essential workers during early morning hours when the city's transit system has been shut down for cleaning during the pandemic. As of this writing, there is no additional information regarding this proposal.

Following a lengthy and bitter strike in 1979, the city implemented the Employment Protection Provision, known as EPP. Under this policy, workers' pay and seniority were protected, even when they moved from one bus company to another. Under former mayor Michael Bloomberg, billionaire and erstwhile candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, the policy was eliminated following a month-long strike in 2013 that was betrayed by ATU Local 1181-1061.

The betrayal was justified based on a supposed pledge to the union by the various Democrats then running for mayor, including Bill de Blasio, the ultimate winner and self-styled progressive, that the EPP would be reinstated. That never happened.

Governor Cuomo vetoed a bill to reinstate the EPP that had been passed by the state legislature. The ATU again pushed through a concessions deal last year, despite an overwhelming strike mandate from the membership.

One of the contract concessions agreed to by the ATU was that the union would bargain individually with each company, rather than reach a single agreement with all the companies, as had been done in the past. As a result, competition between companies to win city contracts increased. Wages of existing workers were cut, and companies accelerated the hiring of large numbers of young and inexperienced drivers at even lower pay to replace many of the existing workforce. They then used this to intimidate others into accepting reductions in the terms of their employment. Other changes included elimination of pay for necessary down time between runs.

As was the case in 2013 and 2019, New York school bus workers can place absolutely no confidence in the unions or in the Democratic Party, to which they are bound hand and foot to protect them from destitution. In a completely toothless May 6 letter from ATU Local 1181 President Michael Cordiello to the membership he stated, "We continue to reach out to Mayor deBlasio [sic] [and a number

of other city officials] to demand that they make the right decision for our members by urging them to extend our employers' contracts." Such efforts have yielded nothing but empty promises from city and state officials in the past. They will be equally fruitless now, with even more dire consequences.

Seven years ago, during the 2013 contract struggle, the *World Socialist Web Site* was the only news source telling the truth about the struggle, in print or online. 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.

At that time, in response to a call by the Socialist Equality Party, a group of school bus workers took an initial step toward the formation of a rank-and-file committee to take the fight out of the hands of the treacherous union. This effort must be renewed and taken forward. School bus workers cannot defend themselves alone against the ruling-class assault on the entire working population. The COVID-19 pandemic is an international crisis of unprecedented proportions. It cannot be defeated on an industry-by-industry or country-by-country basis. While the federal government has massively bailed out Wall Street, workers are being driven into poverty.

Only through the unity of all workers, public and private—teachers, transit, Amazon, UPS and others in the US and globally—building a coalition of rank-and-file workplace and neighborhood committees and fighting for a socialist program to wrest control of society from the financial and corporate elite, can the deadly threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic be overcome.

We urge school bus and other workers to contact the SEP.



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