

New York City school bus drivers and educators face common struggle against unsafe openings

A. Woodson, Steve Light
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Enormous opposition to the unsafe opening of New York City schools forced Mayor Bill de Blasio last week to delay a return to in-person instruction for most students from September 21 to September 29. However, school bus drivers and attendants will be at work today transporting thousands of special education students not affected by the delay.

Over 60 teachers were diagnosed with COVID-19 last week after they reported to school buildings to prepare for the return of students. There is mounting opposition among teachers and other support staff over the thoroughly inadequate testing and contact tracing by the Department of Education (DOE), as well as poor ventilation and other safety measures. Last week saw many protests across the city.

School bus workers who have spent the last weeks doing “dry runs” of their routes have also been angered at the DOE’s refusal to provide adequate safety protections for the drivers and aides who transport hundreds of thousands of students to school.

The Democratic Party, with the full backing of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), is using the restart of in-person instruction in the largest district in the United States—with 1.1 million students—to accelerate the full reopening of other large urban school districts that remain on remote teaching, including Chicago and Los Angeles.

The New York Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was formed earlier this month to unite teachers, school bus drivers and other school employees, with parents, students and others opposed to the reckless reopening of the schools. These committees, which are independent of the unions, have been set up in Los Angeles, Detroit, Texas, Florida and other locations and are fighting to unite educators across state borders and internationally to protect lives.

New York was an early epicenter of the deadly virus with over 24,000 people dying from COVID-19 since March. The victims include at least 79 teachers and in-school staff and another 20 school bus workers. These figures are likely an undercount, since the DOE has notoriously refused to provide accurate estimates of the number who died from the virus. Mayor de Blasio only shut the schools in mid-March after threats by educators to conduct a sick-out in defiance of the UFT. Keeping the schools open for the previous two weeks as the contagion spread is considered to be one of the major contributors to the high death toll throughout the city.

Public school employees know reopening the schools will produce another disaster. One school bus driver told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I don’t like the school reopening. It is scary. If they do it, they are going to have an outbreak, and the city will have to close again. More people will be dead. I haven’t heard from my union [the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181]; they say nothing. The teachers’ union said they were going to strike. But they didn’t. They don’t care.”

Of the 370,000 people employed in the US as school bus workers, more than 70 percent are older than 55 years old, according to the American Association of Retired People. Many older New York City drivers and aides have retired, fearing that going back to work with their health problems would be a death sentence.

Every school bus worker knows that the DOE’s protocols for social distancing and other precautions on school buses are almost impossible to enforce. School officials say school buses will be limited to 25 percent of passenger capacity, that students will wear masks and only be allowed to sit next to a window in every other row unless they are siblings, and that buses will be disinfected every day.

Drivers, however, have pointed out to the WSWS that they need to pay attention to the road in the extremely congested city traffic and cannot enforce these rules. More attendants, they say, are needed to monitor and assist students to maintain seating and proper mask usage. There is no rear door entry or plastic shields around drivers as there is in the public buses run by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which themselves have proven to be woefully inadequate in preventing the spread of the coronavirus and the death of drivers. Windows in school buses by law cannot be opened more than three inches, providing poor ventilation or none at all in cold or inclement weather. Temperature checks, drivers note, will only be done at the school and children may infect each other or the driver or attendant on their ride there. Temperature checks also do not detect asymptomatic carriers.

A school bus driver who works for Consolidated Bus Transit noted, “The only training was a ten-minute video. We were given fifty masks; I don’t know how long that is supposed to last but we give masks to children who do not have one. It is up to drivers to clean the bus, but we are not professionals, and no one checks if we do it right. It will be overtime that I don’t think we will be paid.”

Another driver from the Logan Bus Company explained, “They told me I will have 11 kids. But we are driving minivans. You can’t help putting kids together in the same seat. I talked with the company, and the company says this may be solved because some students may be going to school on one day and some on the other students’ days off. The union has talked just like the company, saying that maybe on the three days some kids will be going to school, the others won’t.”

After breaking contracts with the city’s private bus companies in March to cover revenue loss, the city has been negotiating to purchase three bus companies. The DOE budget for pupil transportation this fiscal year was \$120 million less than last year’s budget. The CARES Act did not include school bus companies in its bailout.

On April 30, 16,000 New York City school bus drivers and attendants were furloughed. The Logan driver explained the pressure on workers, “They put us on unemployment immediately after they shut down the schools in March, plus the \$600 [supplement] after a while, and at least I could pay my bills. What is going to happen now if we don’t go back to work? Look at the retirement schedule. If you are a matron and work 30 years you make \$800 a month. If you are a driver and retire after 25 years, you get \$1,300 a month, and just

have to move on to the next job.”

City school bus workers went on strike for a month in 2013 when billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg terminated the Employment Protection Plan (EPP), which guaranteed the workers’ standard pay and benefits if they were forced to transfer to another private company.

The ATU isolated the strike, and then shut it down based on a promise by de Blasio and the other Democratic mayoral candidates to “reexamine” the issue. This resulted in many drivers having their pay cut in half. De Blasio and Governor Andrew Cuomo have not restored the EPP.

The betrayal by the ATU has left school bus drivers and attendants impoverished. Before the pandemic these workers often worked twelve hours but were only paid for eight. When driver absences began to increase because of the pandemic, workers were assigned double loads to pick up routes where drivers were absent.

The pandemic has highlighted the enormous class chasm in the US. People living in America’s poorest households are as much as 32 percent more likely to die of coronavirus than their wealthier counterparts, according to an earlier analysis from the Imperial College of London. While the affluent can afford private “pods” to teach very small groups of children, millions of working-class New Yorkers feel compelled to send their children to school because they cannot afford child care and would be fired from their low-paying jobs if they took time off of work.

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is uniting all school workers to fight the unsafe openings while at the same time demanding full income for parents who must stay home to care for their children. To pay for this we call for a sharp tax increase on the wealthy, including the 118 billionaires in New York City whose net worth jumped \$77.3 billion or 14.8 percent in the first three months of the pandemic alone.



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