

School bus drivers in Greenville, Mississippi face disciplinary measures after striking in April

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Late last month, 14 school bus drivers for Mississippi's Greenville Public School District bravely staged a work stoppage, refusing to drive until concerns over reduced work hours, reduction in pay and unsafe working conditions were addressed. For two days, bus service to Greenville's reopened schools was halted while school board officials scrambled to find a way to get drivers back to work.

The 14 drivers, who organized the strike independently of any union or employee organization, reportedly sent out texts and made calls to the school transportation director saying they would not be coming into work. The move was the immediate response to the release of the 2021-22 school employee schedule, which showed a cutdown in working days for bus drivers who had already seen their hours cut for months prior.

The revised schedule also included a provision stating that going forward, drivers and custodians will not only receive fewer workdays but will also only be paid for days worked, suggesting an end to paid holidays and paid sick days.

Speaking to Mississippi Today, driver Edwin Young described the new schedule as the final straw after years of underpayment and mistreatment, stating, "We're not making anything ... We are certified drivers, we got CDLs [commercial driver's license] and we're living at the poverty level." Young added that he is still missing payments for hours worked last October, revealing to board officials that he was only paid \$16,000 for his work throughout all of last year.

Another driver, Yolanda Lewis, reportedly tried to arrange a meeting with the school board but was denied. In addition to having her working hours cut, Lewis was forced to quarantine for 10 days following exposure to students who tested positive for COVID-19. During this

time she received no pay and had already been forced to give up supplemental insurance due to the reduced hours.

The strike action taken by these bus drivers could lead to serious consequences as a result of a little known Mississippi state law prohibiting public school employees from going on strike. The law was passed following the last Mississippi teachers strike held in 1985. That strike, which led to a marginal increase in teacher pay, spurred state lawmakers to pass one of the strictest anti-striking laws in the country.

According to the statute, any action that constitutes "a concerted failure to report for duty, a willful absence from one's position, the stoppage of work, a deliberate slowing down of work, or the withholding, in whole or in part, of the full, faithful and proper performance of the duties of employment, for the purpose of inducing, influencing or coercing a change in the conditions, compensation, rights, privileges or obligations of public employment" can be considered a strike and is therefore unlawful.

This reactionary law was first applied to public school teachers, but a second statute was drafted to essentially expand this language to all public school employees. According to the law, the striking drivers could not only be fired but also banned from working in any public school in the state ever again, in addition to possible fines and even jail time.

At its latest meeting held Tuesday, the Greenville School Board voted unanimously to once again delay taking any action against the drivers who refused to work. These officials are evidently fearful that punishing the bus drivers could spark broader opposition among educators and other school staff that have gone through the most horrific experiences of their careers over the past year. The board has collected the names of the drivers who took part and are compelled under state law to submit the

names to the state or face daily fines.

At a board meeting last month, there was some deliberation over whether the action taken by the drivers could be called a strike in legal terms. Dorian Turner, an attorney for the Board of Trustees of the Greenville Public School District, reportedly said at the meeting, “It looked to me that what we had was a situation where the bus drivers had gone on strike, and that was activity that was illegal.” She continued, “If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, you’ve probably got a duck on your hands. They may or may not have known that doing that was an illegal activity, but that was the effect of all those employees deciding not to come to work.”

Across the country, school districts face a shortage of bus drivers following mass layoffs last year as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and proliferation of remote learning. As the back-to-school drive intensifies amid the widespread dropping of mask mandates, the need for transportation workers to return to work amid the pandemic is driving efforts among several public school districts to force drivers back onto the job.

Many drivers, however, are unable to return to jobs that put them at such risk. In some cities, such as Pittsburgh and Denver, there were driver shortages even before the pandemic. Wages for such jobs, especially in Mississippi, have been stagnant for years, with most drivers forced to live on poverty wages while school boards across the nation cut services and funding across the board.

Between May 20 and May 27, there have been 1,109 confirmed new COVID-19 cases in Mississippi and 26 deaths. Since the start of the pandemic, there have officially been 317,407 confirmed cases and 7,310 deaths. The governor of Mississippi, Tate Reeves, lifted the state’s mask mandate in early March.

The fact that drivers, teachers and other school employees are prohibited by law to strike or take part in any work stoppage shows the desperate need to form new workers organizations in the state to secure workers’ right to fight for their livelihoods.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has assisted educators and other workers form networks of rank-and-file committees across the US and globally, which are democratically run by workers themselves and independent of the corporatist unions and both big business parties.

Kathy, a school bus driver from the Philadelphia area and a member of the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, sent the following message to Mississippi bus drivers in support of their struggle:

As a bus driver, yes, we support all bus drivers everywhere. We are professionals. We have hours of training to receive a commercial driver’s license (CDL), which we have to recertify every four years. We have to think about safety all the time for the students. Yet we are not treated as professionals by the unions, districts, or bus companies. They pay little, cut hours, and throw us under the bus as far as treatment. We provide a service to the public and are committed to make sure each child is safely transported to and from school and home two to three times each day.

The companies keep cutting the hours, which cuts our pay. It is harder and harder to live. We went through outsourcing. We were going to have a letter writing campaign to send letters to all the parents. The day we were going to do it, the union told us not to. We lost our benefits, the only thing keeping us there is that our pay was grandfathered. Drivers need to have our own organization to fight.

Mississippi school bus drivers and educators must form rank-and-file committees to unify their struggles across the state to fight for better wages and safer work environments. The social crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic must be met with the independent movement of the working class. Help build the growing network of Rank-and-File Safety Committees today!



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