

Las Cruces, New Mexico school bus drivers hold limited strike against stalled negotiations

D. Lencho

31 October 2021

Bus drivers for Las Cruces Public Schools (LCPS) in southern New Mexico held a brief strike on October 28. Although it has been referred to as a one-day strike, it only began after the drivers had delivered the students on their morning routes. The drivers then picketed the office of their employer, Student Transportation Specialists (STS) New Mexico over their demands.

While the drivers did not work that afternoon for the regular student ridership of about 3,500, they provided transportation for disabled and special education students.

By the next morning, they were back on the job, as their union, Las Cruces Transportation Federation (LCTF) Local 6341, resumed talks with STS that have dragged on since July.

The drivers want a substantial increase in their pay, updated safety language, updated sick day allotments and benefits. Currently, New Mexico bus drivers' starting pay is about \$13 per hour, with a \$0.25-an-hour raise *after two years*, and no other raise for three more years. STS's highest offer has been a 10 percent raise, which would raise starting hourly pay to barely above \$14.

Drivers are also demanding that STS address the staffing shortages that have plagued the district as bus drivers have left to seek higher-paid work elsewhere. The LCPS has about 120 routes, and as of October 1 STS had a deficit of 23 drivers. STS has prevailed on mechanics to drive, slowing the progress of repairs and maintenance on the company's buses, leading to another problem, the unsafe and unreliable condition of the buses, many of which are outdated as well.

LCTF responded to that longstanding complaint on September 26, when it invited a local clergyman to bless the buses on the STS lot.

Drivers have to take on extra routes to make up for

the shortages, resulting in inevitable delays. Although there are ongoing training programs, most driver trainees bail out before the end of their course. For those who gain certification and some experience, many will seek higher-paying work with the city or Greyhound.

As one driver told the *Las Cruces Sun-News*, drivers have to make sure the kids are behaving and following the rules at the same time they have to drive safely. The 10-year school bus driver veteran remarked, "A lot of the drivers don't understand, until they get kids on the bus, what they have to put up with. Then they go, 'The work's not worth the pay.'"

The drivers had voted on September 28 by a 98 percent margin to strike if the LCTF and STS did not reach an agreement by the time of the expiration of their contract on October 3. Nonetheless, the LCTF extended the contract and negotiations, with LCTF president Dean Abrams claiming that striking was a drastic measure that drivers wanted to avoid. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Western Region is assisting the LCTF. The former's director, Ramiro Hernandez, admitted that there has been "zero progress" on negotiations.

The drivers' impatience over the lack of progress forced the LCTF to call the less-than-one-day walkout. The bureaucrats were soon contacted by the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, described by AFT New Mexico as "a federal agency dedicated to promoting labor-management peace," and asked to "voluntarily" return the drivers to work as yet more negotiations take place.

The statement went on to claim, "Unless a just solution is reached, further disruptions to student transportation could occur if STS-NM leaves us with no other options to resolve this dispute." Coming from

a leadership that considers strikes as drastic measures to be avoided, STS has little to fear.

American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten got into the act with a tweet, telling the drivers, “We’ve got your back!” Considering the AFT’s, and in particular Weingarten’s, role in sabotaging teachers’ strikes, promoting the unsafe return to in-person instruction, and collaboration with right-wing herd immunity advocates, the wise course for the drivers would be, “Watch your own backs!”

The bus drivers cannot count on their “leadership” to carry their struggle forward. That will require the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the union and democratically controlled by workers. These committees will formulate workers’ demands and organize a real fight, linking the fight of school bus drivers with other workers coming into struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact