

School bus drivers and attendants strike in three Maryland counties in October

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School bus drivers and attendants in three neighboring Maryland counties launched three individual strikes over the course of October. Amidst a nationwide shortage of school bus drivers, workers in Anne Arundel, Calvert and Charles counties have been angered by the lack of pay and benefits as well as continued exposure to COVID-19.

School bus drivers in Anne Arundel County started the strike wave when they took their job action on October 4 and 5. At least 24 drivers took part in the action, which impacted 80 bus routes and 38 schools.

Lisa Beauchamp, a striking bus driver, told local TV station WBAL, "I know I am not going to be rich here, I am not trying to do that. But I love my job. I love my children that's on the bus. But I also have to eat, too."

Another driver, Missie Savoy, explained, "We've been thinking about [a strike] for a while. It's just we got to the point where we are fed up and, you know, something has to happen."

Anne Arundel County Public Schools responded to the drivers' action by proposing raises of \$5 an hour, along with \$2,000 signing and retention bonuses. The county council is set to vote on the plan in November.

Less than a week later, in Calvert County, school bus drivers took strike action on October 11 and 12. The bus drivers have had no raises in 10 years. In addition, in the current school year, the cost of medical and dental benefits went up significantly and life insurance was eliminated. Drivers are paid between \$18 and \$24 an hour, with only 5.75 hours a day of work guaranteed.

"I feel like we've always been dismissed," Karen Pitcher, a bus driver of 31 years, told the local ABC affiliate. "We love our job. We love our kids. We're sorry that it's an inconvenience, but enough's enough. Now we've got to do something and that's why we're

here."

"We don't want to be here. We feel like this is our last resort," driver Missy Koontz told the local Fox affiliate. "It's not getting any better for us. We're constantly losing here."

In addition to abysmal pay and benefits, Koontz explained that drivers are responsible for double the number of routes due to a severe bus driver shortage, which is a nationwide problem.

After an October 15 meeting with public school officials went nowhere, the Calvert County drivers took further action this week, striking every day except Tuesday. By Thursday, 100 out of the county's 134 school bus drivers were on strike and 80 percent of bus routes canceled.

On October 22, unionized school bus drivers in Charles County, just to the west of Calvert County, began a wildcat strike over inadequate pay, high health care costs and dangerous working conditions. The strike has continued all week.

The Charles County strikers, independent of their union, are demanding an immediate increase in pay of \$15 per hour for drivers and \$10 for attendants. Other demands include a low-cost health plan, paid federal holidays and snow days, a retention bonus of \$2,250, and a new hire bonus of \$1,000.

The Charles County bus drivers and attendants are members of Local 2981 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). In response to the workers' militancy, AFSCME and the school system hastily negotiated a 4 percent "cost of living" increase on Tuesday, to go into effect December 10. With inflation running above 5 percent, the wage agreement is an insult to the drivers.

Significantly, despite the token wage increase reached by the union, many workers have continued the strike,

although, according to the county's figures, only about 10 percent of bus routes were not running on Friday, compared with a peak disruption of 33 percent Wednesday.

A Charles County driver told the local NBC affiliate, "We have to take this action to be heard and for things to change. Anybody that has a job, you know you need a raise every now and then."

School bus drivers in other parts of the state are taking notice of the rising militancy. Baltimore County bus drivers held a protest Tuesday night at the school board, calling for increases in pay. Drivers there, who are represented by another AFSCME local, start at only \$16.69 an hour, with attendants are receiving a paltry \$11.75.

COVID-19 also remains a concern for bus drivers, with hundreds having died nationwide. Kathy Parks, a Baltimore County driver, told WBAL, "It's getting so bad that we have many drivers that don't even want to come in that are very loyal and faithful, but they are scared of getting sick."

The rising militancy among bus drivers takes place in the midst of a massive bus driver shortage. Various counties in Maryland report extreme shortages: Prince George's County is short about 200 drivers; Howard County, one of the wealthiest in the country, has 95 vacancies; Baltimore County needs 87 drivers; Anne Arundel County has over 60 vacancies; and Harford County is short 53 drivers and 24 attendants.

Given this shortage, bus drivers have huge leverage to obtain significant wage and benefit increases. However, they will be unable to achieve their demands through the trade unions, which are working to limit the wave of strikes across the country and enforce agreements favorable to management. The experience in Charles County shows that the unions are unwilling to fight even for a wage increase that keeps pace with inflation. The unions also do nothing to mount coordinated strikes or attempt to link up the struggles of bus drivers with those of teachers and other school workers.

AFSCME Council 67, which is the Maryland-wide AFSCME affiliate, has made no mention of the Charles County strike on its website nor on its Twitter and Facebook accounts. Likewise, Local 2981 has maintained radio silence on the wildcat strike by its members.

Indicating a justified distrust of the unions, in

response to a question about unionization, Calvert County driver Juliet Butler told *Southern Maryland News* "We are going to create our own" organization. The Teamsters unsuccessfully attempted to unionize the Calvert County drivers more than 12 years ago.

The *World Socialist Web Site* agrees that bus drivers and all workers must create their own organizations free of the unions, and encourages school bus drivers to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. The Safety Committee, part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, aims to unify workers, independent of the unions, to close schools and all non-essential production until COVID-19 is eliminated. We also call for full wage and benefit support to all workers and small businesses affected by such a necessary shutdown.

Bus drivers are joining a growing strike wave in the United States and around the world which lays the basis for a common fight by workers to end the capitalist system, the fundamental cause of the deteriorating living standards faced by workers around the world.



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