

School bus drivers launch wildcat strikes across the United States

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In recent weeks, school bus drivers in a number of states have engaged in strikes, including numerous wildcat actions independent of the unions. The drivers are protesting abysmal pay and increased workloads amidst a massive nationwide shortage of bus drivers exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since October, strikes of bus drivers have taken place in North Carolina, Maryland and New Mexico. On Monday, unionized bus drivers in Smithfield, Rhode Island, voted to authorize a strike and a strike vote was due to take place Friday involving drivers from three Delaware counties.

More than 100 bus drivers in Cumberland County, North Carolina, are engaged in an ongoing strike that started on Tuesday. Starting pay in the county is only \$12.21 an hour. “We love our kids, but we have to stand out here to make people see how we are being treated,” Gwendolyn McKelvin, a bus driver for special needs students, told local television station WRAL. She added, “We call ourselves CNAs with CDLs” because of the extra responsibilities such drivers have to care for the medical needs of these students.

Cumberland County, which has 46 vacant driver positions, has not offered any specific wage increases to date, only the “possibility” of a 3 percent increase, according to county spokesperson Lindsay Whitley. With inflation rising at a 30-year high of over 6 percent, such a pay “increase” will in fact amount to a massive pay cut.

The Cumberland County strike comes on the heels of a four-day strike by bus drivers in North Carolina’s largest school district, Wake County, where drivers’ pay starts at \$15 an hour. The strike began on Friday, October 29, with at least 200 out of 600 drivers calling out sick.

On November 2, the third day of the Wake County strike, the board of education approved a one-time \$1,250 bonus. In response to this insulting pay increase, at least 30 bus drivers continued the strike the following day. “The board needs to understand that we are not playing [around]. We are [out] to get our raise, and we are not going to stop until we get it,” a driver told WRAL.

The same driver explained that working conditions are abysmal. “When I say stressful, it is like, beyond stressful. You have some drivers out here that are on food stamps and that are on housing assistance.”

Another Wake County driver, Alicia McNeil, told Spectrum News 1, “The burnout and the stress is really starting to take a toll on all of us.” With 220 driver vacancies in the county, the

remaining drivers have to take on extra routes. McNeil, a bus driver for 21 years, has to wake up at 4 a.m. everyday. She also spends four hours in the parking lot between drop off and pick up bus runs each day because she cannot afford gas to go home between shifts.

Another wildcat bus driver action planned for October 28 in Forsyth County, North Carolina, was called off at the last moment after school transportation officials met with a group of bus drivers to discuss their concerns. Kimberly Shouse, a driver, told local media that 200 of the county’s 286 bus drivers were prepared to strike. The county has 67 bus driver vacancies.

Confirming the hostility of the Democratic Party to the needs and interests of the working class, Democratic state representative Rosa Gill told WRAL in regard to the strikers, “Most of our non-certified school personnel are underpaid and that is why the Governor’s and House of Representatives’ budgets proposed a minimum hourly wage of \$15. We will continue advocating for the \$15 to be in this year’s budget.”

Notably, all of the actions in North Carolina took place without union sanction. After the Forsyth County wildcat action did not take place, Heather Bolling, president of the North Carolina School Bus Drivers Association, told the *Winston-Salem Journal*, “Striking is illegal, and therefore not the answer.”

Maryland has also seen a wave of bus driver strikes. As with the job actions in North Carolina, none were sanctioned by a union. Starting in early October, drivers struck in Anne Arundel, Calvert and Charles counties. On Monday, about 80 bus drivers in Howard County, the seventh wealthiest in the United States, called a sickout over inadequate pay and the complete lack of any benefits.

“The county knew months ago that we had an issue and they failed to follow it through,” bus driver Dianne Withers told WBAL. Withers added, “We have not had an increase in pay since 2000 [or] a cost of living [raise] since 2009.”

Sharon Decker, another bus driver, told the local CBS affiliate, “We had to take a stand and fight for what we feel like we need and what we deserve.”

Indicating the significant power that bus drivers have, the county responded the same day of the strike by offering two \$2,500 bonuses, one paid this month and another in December. Howard County is short 95 bus drivers.

In Las Cruces, New Mexico, unionized bus drivers took part in a one-day strike on October 28. Significantly, in contrast to the wildcat actions in other states, the one-day action was called off

without any agreement for higher wages.

Las Cruces Transportation Federation Local #6341, which represents the drivers, and the American Federation of Teachers New Mexico, issued a joint statement at the end of the first and only day of the strike, which read:

Late this afternoon, representatives from the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, a federal agency dedicated to promoting labor-management peace, contacted LCTF leadership with a request to voluntarily return to work tomorrow. Our drivers and attendants have chosen to return to work to not only demonstrate our willingness to find solutions to this current strike, but more importantly to honor our deep commitment to the students of Las Cruces Public Schools.

In other words, the unions ended the strike after getting less than nothing for the striking bus drivers.

The joint statement ended with a toothless warning that “[u]nless 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.”

On Monday, in Smithfield, Rhode Island, bus drivers, monitors and aides voted unanimously to authorize a strike. The workers are represented by Teamsters Local 251. Given the track record of the Teamsters, which undemocratically forced through a 2018 contract at United Parcel Service despite a majority “no” vote, any strike that manages to break out will end in a sell-out which falls far short of bus drivers’ demands.

In announcing the unanimous strike vote, Local 251 noted that the drivers unionized almost a year ago and still have no contract. The union also explained that it was only demanding that the drivers “be paid what other workers in the same field get paid.” According to *School Bus Fleet* magazine, the national average starting pay for a bus driver is \$18.82 per hour.

On Friday, bus drivers working in Appoquinimink, Christina and New Castle counties in Delaware were reportedly set to vote on strike action. As with the Rhode Island drivers, these workers are represented by a Teamsters local.

In late October, bus drivers in Seminole County, Florida, which is short 51 drivers, threatened a sickout regarding low pay. The drivers planned the action independent of their union, the Seminole County School Bus Drivers’ Association. The wildcat action was put on hold after the district agreed to pay an additional attendance bonus of around \$2,000.

The executive director of the Seminole County School Bus Drivers’ Association, Chardo Richardson, told the Orlando Sentinel that the planned rank-and-file strike was not union organized or encouraged. He stated, “We have a great relationship with the district, we don’t want to ruin that relationship and more so, we don’t want our children standing at bus stops in the dark, unsupervised without parents, that’s what’s most discouraging or disheartening to us.”

While doing everything it can to prevent strike action,

Richardson acknowledged that the pandemic was taking a tremendous toll on drivers. “What’s happened with COVID, they’re overworked, they’re having to take on more and more routes and these folks are working 12-hour days.”

According to the Twitter account “School Personnel Lost to Covid,” at least 235 bus drivers and bus aides have died nationwide from COVID-19.

The growing nationwide strike movement of bus drivers demonstrates that only when workers take action completely independent of the unions can any success be achieved. Like the teachers’ unions, which have almost completely stamped out strike action during the pandemic, the bus driver unions are doing all they can to keep schools operating so that working class parents can return to their jobs making enormous profits for the corporations.

The pandemic has also only worsened a long-standing trend of bus driver shortages. *School Bus Fleet* magazine reports that more than 50 percent of school districts have had a bus driver shortage every year since 2006. In most years, more than 70 percent of districts are affected.

There are also severe nationwide shortages for other education-related jobs, including cafeteria workers, custodians, substitute teachers and paraprofessionals, with 40 percent of school districts reporting either “severe” or “very severe” staffing shortages, according to Education Week.

While unlimited sums are made available to the banks and major corporations, the ruling class is unable to provide the relatively modest amounts needed for fully staffed buses, cafeterias and classrooms for the working class. The staffing shortage exposes the hypocrisy of those claiming that schools must be reopened, while the pandemic rages on, “for the sake of the children.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges bus drivers, teachers and all other education workers who want to see fully funded and high quality public education to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. It is only through such committees, which are part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, that a united movement of the working class can be built to coordinate the growing strikes of bus drivers and the thousands of other workers currently on strike in the United States and around the world.



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