

Wildcat school bus driver sickout in Louisiana forces retreat by school district

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On February 11, dozens of school bus drivers of the St. Tammany Parish School District staged a wildcat sickout over ongoing tensions with the district centered on pay and increased workload due to driver shortages. Approximately 62 bus drivers called in sick, affecting 14 schools in the district.

The District has 55 schools and employs nearly 400 bus drivers. The drivers, who have been fighting the district and their own union on wage increases, staged the sickout without the knowledge of the union.

Unlike most school districts nationally and in Louisiana itself, St. Tammany uses a burdensome “owner-operator” model, in which school bus drivers purchase their own buses and pay for maintenance and operational costs. The starting salary for a driver is less than \$26,000, and is supplemented by “operational pay” of roughly \$8,500 from the state, which has not increased since 1986.

The sickout comes as part of a wave of educator and student struggles that have erupted across the US and internationally following the reopening of schools in January. Just in the South, teachers and students engaged in sickouts and walkouts in Baton Rouge, Round Rock, Texas and Birmingham, Alabama.

Less than a week after the sickout in St. Tammany, dozens of bus drivers in nearby Tangipahoa Parish called in sick for afternoon pickups after dropping students off in the morning. Few details were released, and it is unclear if this was a deliberate action.

Brant Osborn, president of the St. Tammany Federation of Teachers and School Employees, the union ostensibly representing the drivers, immediately distanced himself and the union from the sickout, which he called “disorganized labor.”

“This was not sanctioned by the federation. And it was not. We didn’t even know.” Osborn said. Showing

more concern over the reputation of the school district than for the issues facing his members, he continued, “I hate to hear that families were hurt by this, and I know they were. And it’s extremely frustrating.”

According to superintendent Frank Jabbia, the union agreement reached previously even prohibits such a sickout, as he explained in a frustrated call to parents. “I want everyone to know that we have a collective bargaining agreement with our union, the St. Tammany Federation of Teachers and School Employees. And Article 18 of that agreement prohibits sickouts, work stoppages, or strikes because we know that this will directly impact students and families,” Jabbia said in the robocall last Friday.

Following the sickout, the union and the district superintendent scrambled in private meetings to reach an agreement. The details of these calls were illustrated in a meeting with drivers in which workers called the district’s initial proposal of an additional \$200 a month “insulting.”

Responding to the threat of another sickout, the district held an emergency school board meeting on Monday, at which drivers accepted an offer four times the district’s initial offer.

The drivers will receive a temporary increase in operational pay, \$400 a month for the last four months of the school year, and a one-time stipend payment of \$2,500. However, there were no guarantees of this deal extending into the next school year and no promises were made for future stipends.

One driver, Erania Foster, spoke to local reporters on the critical need for higher pay for drivers: “It’s been whether or not fueling a bus or oil change or maybe a tire or even going as far as putting food on the table for your family or gas in your bus so you can go to work so you can provide for your family,” she said.

Across the country, the teachers unions, led by the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, have played the central role in blocking a unified struggle by educators to halt school reopenings and prevent the spread of COVID-19. The sickouts and strikes that have broken out have been either isolated and betrayed, as happened in Chicago, or met with hostility by the unions, as happened here.

While not an explicit element of the sickout, the ongoing pandemic has no doubt exacerbated conditions for bus drivers, including longer routes resulting from staff shortages, the cuts in pay due to ill-planned last minute closures, to the dangers of driving busloads of students each day.

In late October, following the green light from Democratic Governor John Bel Edwards, the district ended mask mandates. At the time, school board member Tammy Lamy said of masks, “I feel like it gave a false sense of security for health and we are very well aware that they don’t work at all.”

This week, in line with bipartisan efforts across the country to remove any remaining mitigation measures, the district ended student and staff quarantines for close contacts of infected people and also ceased conducting contact tracing.

Meanwhile, despite a temporary decline in cases, COVID continues to spread widely throughout Louisiana schools. Since August, there have been over 73,000 cases among students and staff, of which over 43,000 have occurred since winter break. In St. Tammany, there have been 4,556 school infections since August.

Further, the deadly impact of the Omicron variant on children is beginning to emerge, with Louisiana announcing three pediatric deaths in the past week alone, two of which were children under five years old. This is part of a national trend, in which over half of pediatric COVID-19 deaths in the US have occurred just since November.

To carry forward their struggle for higher wages and safe working conditions, bus drivers and other educators must draw the lessons of this episode. First, the role of the local union is made clear in its denunciations of the sickout and its efforts to prevent drivers from expanding their struggle. Second, that the district was forced to concede to some of the drivers’ demands indicates the power of the working class when

it takes collective action.

Bus drivers and other educators are encouraged to reach out to the Southern Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees (SERFSC), a regional group of democratic organizations entirely independent of the trade unions and big business political parties. The SERFSC, in solidarity with committees around the US and internationally, is committed to unifying educators in a mass movement against the pandemic and the attacks on public education, wages and working conditions.



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