

New York school bus workers prepare to strike

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Thousands of school bus drivers and attendants in New York City are set to strike at the beginning of the school year on September 7 in an effort to recoup a decade of concessions following the sabotage of their 2013 strike. Absent an agreement, the strike would immediately involve roughly half of the 8,000-member school bus workforce in the city. Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1181 intends to limit the scope of the action by ordering the remaining half of workers to continue working during a strike.

The widespread sentiment among bus workers for a renewed struggle was expressed in a series of strike authorization votes at several school bus contractors, which garnered the approval of 93 percent of workers in favor of strike action. Both veteran and newer workers are angry that pay and benefits are insufficient for living in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

Since ATU 1181 shut down the month-long strike in 2013 on the bogus claim that the incoming mayor would “revisit” the removal of employee protections, school bus workers have suffered an unending string of givebacks. These include the refusal of companies to pay for time worked between morning and afternoon runs, the gutting of overtime pay, the elimination of paid holidays, a twelve-year duration to reach top pay, and the requirement that workers’ families wait five years to be covered by health insurance. In addition, following the 2013 strike, the union broke up the master contract covering all bus workers in the city into company-by-company pacts.

This attack on school bus workers, initiated by former Mayor and billionaire Michael Bloomberg, has continued under successive Democratic mayors, including the current mayor, Eric Adams. This week, the Adams administration announced an “action plan” for a potential strike that illustrates their hostility to school bus workers and the families of the 80,000 students who may be impacted.

Adams’s plan touted the concessions extracted in recent contracts for teachers in the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and municipal workers in the Association of State,

County and Municipal Employees District Council 37 (AFSCME DC-37), which resulted in wage increases far below inflation.

“We anticipate and hope for a similar constructive approach with our bus companies and their employees,” schools chancellor David Banks said. In other words, the administration is pushing for continued concessions from school bus workers with the hope that the union can force through a sellout along similar lines as other city unions.

The plan by the mayor and chancellor paid lip service to the impact on students while derisively offering most of those potentially impacted Metrocards for city subways and buses, something students are already entitled to. A smaller number of families would be offered reimbursement for ride-shares, though it would do little for parents who need to work at times when students are dropped off and released from school. There would be no remote classroom option for students unable to attend school in person during any potential stoppage resulting from the refusal of the city and companies to ensure a living wage for bus workers.

While school bus workers are itching for a battle, they face a union bureaucracy intent on sabotaging the struggle before it has even begun. The ATU held strike authorization votes at only a limited number of “legacy” bus companies, including NYCSBUS, Consolidated, Pioneer and Logan, which together make up just half of the bus routes for the New York City school system. In doing so, the union chiefs are adopting a “divide and rule” strategy to weaken workers’ power and impose the dictates of Mayor Adams and New York Governor Kathy Hochul, whom they supported.

Legacy companies are those in which school bus workers had their wages and benefits severely cut in 2013 under former Mayor Bloomberg. This was a result of the elimination of the workers’ Employment Protection Plan (EPP), which guaranteed maintenance of their seniority level in wages and benefits if they transferred to another bus company. Local 1181 isolated workers on the picket line for a month in January 2013. This was opposed by a rank-and-

file committee, which was built prior to the union shutting down the strike on the promise by the Democratic candidates in the 2013 mayoral election, including eventual victor Bill de Blasio, that they would “revisit” reinstating the EPP. This remained a broken promise.

After the strike, many workers had their pay and benefits cut. Wages became so low that the school bus companies have a shortage of workers and demand workers take on double routes, which results in children having to sit on the bus for as many as two hours and being late for the start of school. School bus drivers and attendants were not originally included in those given unemployment aid at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and then were forced back to work when schools were reopened without necessary public safety measures. They were not informed by schools when the children they carried were reported positive for COVID. As of November 2021, the WSWs had reported that at least 235 drivers and bus aides had died nationwide from COVID.

Similar to the 2013 struggle, the union bureaucracy is now imposing a virtual information blackout as they negotiate in secret. What has leaked out indicates the union’s attempt to cut a deal that meets none of the school bus workers’ core demands, similar to the process following strike authorizations in 2015 and 2020. A Consolidated company driver told the WSWs he heard that ATU 1181 is merely asking for minor improvements to contracts in which previously they agreed to lower tiers for new workers.

No confidence can be given to the contract negotiations that are being conducted in secret by the ATU international and local leadership. The lie that there is no money for decent wages, work and living conditions in a city with 107 billionaires must be rejected. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees invites school bus drivers and attendants to join with its Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Committee and build committees in every yard to unify and expand their struggle, joining strength with teachers, transit, hospital, and other workers that are facing the same battle.

A driver at Consolidated for 35 years told the WSWs, “We should get a 7 percent wage increase at least because that is what inflation is. They should not be giving out two routes. They don’t to me because they know I am in a position to refuse it but they do give them to the younger drivers. They just hired a bunch of drivers, and they only get health insurance after one year and insurance to cover their wife and children only after three years. So that is why they leave after a few months.”

“Why do we need the union as a middleman to make money?” a bus driver for NYCSBUS for 23 years asked. “There is corruption. There were 67 OPT [Office of Pupil Transportation, which administers school busing for the

Department of Education] members who were connected with Local 1181. We need to raise our voice. The union has its own voice. The union says it is fighting but they are just ruffling feathers. I think the contract will be resolved after school opens. They will make us come in for the short week and then resolve it.

“There are trillions of dollars being made in education. They have it. The companies have money for everything we need. Before Reliant became NYCSBUS it got \$44 million for three years—vacation accrual, overtime, snow days. A lot of members are not receiving it except Tier One. There are grants from the federal government. All the money is already figured out. It is in the account of the vendors. But we are not getting any more. So where did it go? Who is getting it?”

Asked about the trillions of dollars that were going to the war, he said, “War makes money. Sure, Ukraine is suffering, but money is being made with the price of gas.”

Another NYCSBUS driver for six years started as a matron 10 years ago. “I am totally ready for striking,” she told the WSWs. “My main concern for the contract is the number of years it takes to reach top pay. The situation is worse for the matrons whose top pay is \$18 an hour, which does not meet the cost of living. Health benefits can be better. We bust our asses and we are struggling. I have to work two jobs. My primary job is the school bus and after that I go to work as a home healthcare aide.

“Even before COVID, there was already a need for better conditions because we have special ed students with weak immune systems. Some parents may send their children to school even when sick, even with a 101 degree temperature. I came to work for Reliant after I was fined by the non-union Vinnie’s bus company, after catching flu from a student and having to be out sick.”

Driving school buses for 27 years, 12 at Consolidated, a driver said, “Our summer vacation pay is unemployment pay, which is not full salary. We need that in our contract and they need to up the pay. Right now the top pay is only \$35 an hour. It is always the same, there is money for the war but not for us. The war is disgusting. Every time they throw a bomb, they send more money over there.”



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