

New York school bus workers kept on the job despite strike authorization

Daniel de Vries
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Thousands of school bus drivers and attendants in New York City are being forced to remain on the job despite overwhelmingly approving a strike after their contracts expired in June. After backtracking on a threat to walk out at the start of the school year last Thursday, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1181 officials are collaborating with the Democratic administration of Mayor Eric Adams to prevent a strike indefinitely.

“If we were to have a strike, it probably would not be for several weeks from now,” New York City Schools Chancellor David Banks said at an event Friday in Harlem. He reported that the ATU is “committed to negotiating. Parents should not be concerned about a strike in the near future, which is a great thing.”

This announcement by Banks was the first any workers heard about promises to refrain from striking for weeks. Facing an uproar from members who have been kept in the dark throughout contract negotiations, Local 1181 President/Business Agent Thomas Fret attempted damage control. In an initial letter to the membership on Friday, Fret acknowledged the schools chancellor’s remarks and commented, “While we’re doing everything we can to avoid a strike, a potential strike remains. We have made no commitment not to strike.”

In a second letter the same day, Fret began by celebrating that Thursday was “just like any other first day of school.” This is precisely the problem. School bus workers, along with other sections of the working class, cannot tolerate the continued attack on wages and benefits—which are part of the generalized attack on public education—and are determined to fight back.

The letter essentially confirmed the union’s commitment to prevent a strike at least through the rest of the month. Fret reported meeting with Mayor Adams Friday without offering concrete details of the talks. “I look forward to seeing you at the end of this month during our general membership meeting (details to be announced),” he told workers, indicating no strike will occur before then.

That the city administration knows more about the ATU’s plans than workers is not coincidental. It reflects a union apparatus that functions not for the membership but in the interests of the Democratic Party and their paymasters on Wall

Street and the corporate board rooms.

The fact that union bureaucracy is wholly divorced from the interests of workers is reflected in the obscene pay for top officials. According to union filings, now-retired President Michael Cordiello made more than \$300,000 last year, up from \$241,000 in 2013, when he oversaw the betrayal of the last school bus workers’ strike. In the meantime, thousands of bus workers were laid off in the aftermath of the strike and new hires brought in at poverty-level wages. Workers lost all pay between morning and afternoon runs and are being cheated out of overtime and holiday pay.

The social and economic crisis facing the working class has intensified over the course of the past few years as the pandemic upended daily life. At all levels of government, the first concern was shoring up the stock market and the position of big business while the working class was left to suffer. School bus workers in New York City, along with millions of other workers around the country, were laid off with limited social support that quickly dried up. As the cost of living exploded, workers faced continued demands for givebacks and wage increases far below inflation.

WSWS reporters spoke with workers at NYCSBUS, a non-profit set up by New York City in the wake of one of the largest bus companies in the city shutting down operations in the area. The city set up NYCSBUS as an outside entity in order to continue the hyper-exploitation of bus workers, denying them benefits guaranteed for city employees.

“If we are still working, who is going to give us anything?” a school bus driver since 2011 asked. “Contract or strike! I would have been here with a sign today if a strike was called.

“To me, our working conditions are the worst thing. They have 2,000 buses that don’t even belong on the street. It is so hot, but there is no air conditioning. We don’t hear anything about the negotiations. The union should not leave the employees in limbo.”

A school bus attendant for 23 years said, “The cost of living is impossible. I make \$477 a week at \$18.27 an hour. I also do patient care in a hospital. I have a mortgage. I am hoping to reach retirement, but that will only give me \$1,000 for 23 years work, \$800 after taxes.

“Local 1181 has so many separated company

contracts—Consolidated, Jofaz, NYCSBUS, more. Why are we so divided? In 2013, they put us through this same BS, and they will do the same BS again. We came in to the yard Thursday for our pick of routes, and instead they already just had them up on the wall. They do what they want to do. Part of the problem is people are afraid to act because they are afraid to lose their job. But a lot of people in the union are two-faced.”

Mayor Adams’ intervention in the school bus struggle is not out of concern for the impact on students and families who rely on Yellow bus service. If that were the case, he could simply reinstate job protections and mandate the restoration of decent benefits and livable wages for school bus workers to ensure uninterrupted bus service.

Adams is the head of an administration that functions on behalf of a capitalist class in a state of immense crisis. Decades of intensifying social inequality have created a volcano of social anger that is poised to erupt. With the economy teetering on the brink of collapse, a political system upended with the threat of dictatorship and workers raising demands for improved conditions, there is a fear that the developing movement of the working class can acquire the character of a rebellion against the profit system itself.

These concerns drive not only the Adams administration’s police state measures and its scapegoating of migrant workers but also its collaboration with the trade union apparatus in forcing through givebacks. All the municipal unions, for instance, worked with Adams in the ongoing attempt to gut public health care benefits for retirees. The public sector unions also recently pushed through sellout contracts for teachers, transit workers, and other civil servants with major pay cuts after factoring in inflation.

Adams’ intervention in the school bus workers’ struggle reflects an understanding that a strike of bus workers, who have connections to broad layers of the population, including teachers and students, could be the impetus for a broader struggle of the working class.

For its part, the ATU bureaucracy is working to dissipate the militancy of bus workers with delay after delay. Even if a strike is called, the ATU will strive to ensure that it is as limited as possible and whatever workers are called out remain isolated.

The ATU has said any strike would only involve roughly half of the workforce. Around 4,000 school bus workers would be ordered to report to work even while their brothers and sisters are fighting against conditions similar throughout the industry.

Following the betrayal in 2013, the union broke up one master contract into dozens of company-specific agreements. School bus workers report to the WSWS that they know nothing about what is going on at other bus companies in the city or even at other depots in the same company.

The ATU, which backed Adams for mayor, is also undermining efforts to prevent the strike from taking on a political character. The apparatus has not uttered a word of criticism towards Adams despite the city holding contracts with

school bus operators and actively preparing to break the strike if it occurs.

In justifying calling off the strike at the start of the school year, ATU Local 1181 President Fret commented to the *Gothamist*, “I did it for the city of New York, for the parents, for the children of New York.” Such a statement supports the reactionary and false narrative of Adams and the companies that the workers are responsible for the potential disruption a strike would cause students and their families.

The situation for families with disabled children or whose parents work during drop-off and dismissal would unquestionably be difficult. Yet it is unambiguously the fault of the city and companies that workers are compelled to withhold their labor in order to fight for a livable wage. Corporate-controlled politicians like Adams claim they have nothing but the best interests of children in mind, while they force them back into classrooms in the midst of a new surge of the pandemic and implement hundreds of millions of dollars in cutbacks to New York City public schools.

For the struggle of bus workers to succeed, everything depends on the independent organization of workers themselves. We urge workers to form rank-and-file committees at every school bus yard to resist efforts of the union bureaucracy to sabotage the struggle. These committees should forge connections with other bus workers, school workers, parents and others in a common fight to demand a massive increase in public school funding.

The fight for what school bus workers need to live also depends on taking up a political struggle against the Adams administration and the subordination of basic needs to private profit. New York City is the home to one of the world’s largest concentrations of billionaires. The defense of the social rights of workers requires a frontal assault on this ill-gotten wealth and a massive redistribution of society’s wealth.



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