

“The system is breaking down. We need to see something different for the future.”

Without a contract for months, New York City school bus workers speak out against intolerable conditions

Steve Light
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To contact the School Bus Workers Rank-and-File Committee, call or text 929-275-2855.

More than four months after their old contract expired, school bus workers in New York City continue to be forced to work without a new labor agreement. They have been strung out without desperately needed wage increases. At the same time, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 officials have sought to sabotage the movement for strike action, which the membership overwhelmingly authorized.

At the end of September, tentative agreements for a subset of bus contractors were prominently announced in the corporate media and hailed for averting a strike. However, since that time, school bus workers have yet to see any details of the supposed deal, much less been presented with a contract to vote on.

Rumors of wage increases range between one percent and three to four percent a year, all of which are grossly inadequate to meet the rising cost of living in New York City, one of the most expensive places to live in the world. In particular, the wages for attendants (also known as matrons) would remain abysmal. Workers reported following a union membership meeting on October 26 that the proposed contract would increase starting pay for matrons to only around \$18 per hour and rise to just \$22 per hour by the end of the five-year contract. Such a sum makes it nearly impossible to support a family even before five more years of inflation.

ATU Local 1181 is still negotiating pacts with a

smaller group of bus contractors. This includes NYCSBUS, which the city established in 2021 as a non-profit in order to deny workers benefits and wages granted to direct city workers. The city-created entity has been among the most obstinate in its demands for further concessions from a workforce grossly understaffed and underpaid.

Drivers, attendants, and mechanics speaking with the *World Socialist Web Site* expressed anger at the companies, the city government headed by Democrat Mayor Eric Adams, and the union.

“I cannot make enough to pay all my bills just from what my school bus job pays,” a bus driver with four years said in front of the Consolidated school bus company yard on Junius Street in Brooklyn. “I have to drive for Uber on my days off and even between my morning and afternoon runs.”

At the NYCSBUS yard in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, a school bus attendant explained, “Today, I had no driver because he was on jury duty, and there was no substitute because there is a shortage of drivers and also of matrons. They do not want to pay people enough. We are the low class.

“I had a stroke last December, and my medical benefits were suspended in May, but they told me nothing. My bills have piled up. I couldn’t keep doctor appointments because I had no insurance. I told the union that my medical was cut, but it did not do anything. I applied for Medicaid, but that took a couple of months. Now that I started to work again in

September, I get Medicaid and don't use the job's medical insurance that could start again. But they still take it out of my check.

"Everybody complains of how it is, and this is why we wanted to go on strike, but the union is not doing anything. Many people lost jobs from 2020 when COVID started, and they didn't hire people again. When they wanted to hire it was new people at lower pay."

Asked about the role of the US government and its support for Israel's genocidal war in Gaza, she declared, "They talk about the Israelis but not the Palestinians. They destroy little kids. The Palestinians are suffering and need to be defended. Trump was the worst, but Biden is even worse. They are putting \$700 million a day for the military. Everything is going to the military, Ukraine, and Israel. This government has to go. This president should be locked up."

Another NYCSBUS driver with thirty-three years' experience commented, "They are doubling up our routes. They are overpacking the buses. I have to pick up kids in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx and take students to three different schools. I am driving students on the bus for two hours in the morning and two-and-a-half hours in the afternoon, and kids misbehave. We work till 7 p.m.

"The company, the union, and the Board of Education don't do anything for us. It feels like we are working for nothing. It is mental anguish and stress. Everybody feels like this. The Board of Ed does not care. There is no cooperation with us to hear us out. So we are not anxious to come to work. The last time they gave a raise, my escort (attendant) got only eighty-six cents, a one-percent raise. That raise went straight to taxes. Meanwhile, they are not taking care of our needs. We are living like in a Third World country? Then they expect citizens to vote. I don't. Why should I?"

An SNT driver from the Consolidated Junius yard spoke to WSWs reporters while he sat in his bus near a school in Manhattan in between runs. "People think we have a break during the day but we are still on the job, having to sit in our bus parked on the street, but not paid. We do not get overtime, but we work fifteen to sixteen-hour day. We need to get to the yard by five in the morning and can get back by 8 pm. The jobs are overwhelming. They keep adding schools to the routes. I am a new driver, but I see that the routes do not get

better even for those with seniority. Many of us are transporting kids with special needs and disabilities, but we often cannot get them to school on time. I have to bring children to four different schools.

"The unions come to you to say they are doing things for you and that they work for the good. But the government tells the companies that they will take away their contracts, so the company tells the unions they cannot pay more, and the union does not fight. But they are all making money. If the union does not strike, then the workers should not get behind the wheel and should refuse to drive. We can have the rank-and-file committee for that."

In a meeting on October 1, sponsored by the *World Socialist Web Site*, several school bus workers drafted a founding statement for the School Bus Workers Rank-and-File Committee. Workers articulated their basic demands, including equal pay for equal work, a cost-of-living adjustment, overtime after eight hours, restoration of the Employee Protection Provision to secure jobs, and one contract for all bus workers. Workers also insisted on the right to see, study, and discuss the contract in full prior to voting on it.

The statement also contrasted the unlimited funds spent for war with the lying claim that there is no money to fund vital social services. It called for the unification of the struggle of bus workers in New York City with other workers across industries who are engaged in battles to improve their conditions.

The SNT driver continued, "I heard that Biden went to the autoworkers picket line in Detroit, but he was only going to get votes. Conditions we face are what they want them to be. If nurses are on strike, it is because they cut medical care for them and others. There are strikes all over the place. The system is breaking down. We need to see something different for the future."



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