

Mass layoff threat for New York City school bus workers delayed until December

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All 52 of New York City's private school bus operators agreed to one-month contract extensions as of Thursday evening, backing down, at least temporarily, from threats to implement mass layoffs and cut off transportation services for 150,000 school children. The companies, which have been operating on a series of emergency extensions since June, made the threats in an attempt to force the city to grant five-year deals ahead of the mayoral election.

The threat to lay off up to 12,000 bus workers and abandon school children, including 68,000 with special needs, is indicative of the utter contempt for the lives of working people by both the companies and the government. From billionaire ex-Mayor Michael Bloomberg to Democrats Bill de Blasio and Eric Adams, successive administrations have overseen a crisis-ridden school busing system, attacking workers and failing to deliver reliable service for the families that depend on it.

The threat by school bus companies to effectively hold students and workers hostage is by no means over. The current agreement resolves nothing, merely pushing back the deadline by 30 days.

The emergency agreements were finalized a day after several hundred school bus workers and concerned families packed New York City's Panel for Educational Policy (PEP) meeting on Wednesday at Food and Finance High School in Midtown Manhattan. At the PEP meeting, it was evident that many school bus workers had been subjected to an information blackout, both by the companies and their union. Many learned through news reports that they could be out of a job come Saturday.

Workers and parents expressed fear, anxiety and anger at the meeting. With the school bus issue relegated to late in the agenda, PEP organizers

attempted to tamp down on opposition and cut off anyone addressing the issue earlier. The crowd erupted in "let them speak" chants whenever the school bus situation was raised and did not relent until time was given to parents and students who insisted on speaking early on the matter.

"Why is this system designed to fail?" one parent asked. "You, PEP, have no solutions, so you just hold another hearing." Another parent explained that their son must get ready by 6:00 a.m. for the two-hour daily bus ride, and now, "the companies are doing corporate hostage-taking against our children."

A bus driver of 25 years denounced the attacks on school bus workers, saying, "Negotiations have been going on for years, and then at the last minute, despite we are all giving our services, we are being told we will be unemployed."

The potential for mass layoffs and a service strike by the companies comes amid a deepening crisis in the privatized school bus industry in New York City, which accelerated after Mayor Bloomberg removed employee protections more than a decade ago. Workers responded with a five-week strike in 2013; however, the Amalgamated Transit Union bureaucracy abruptly shut down the struggle based on a worthless promise from mayoral candidates to restore guarantees that workers would retain their jobs, pay and benefits regardless of which private company won contracts with the city.

In 2011, a court reinforced Bloomberg's elimination of the Employee Protection Provision (EPP), ruling that under current law new contracts cannot contain job guarantees. Democrats and Republicans in Albany have combined to ensure that the law remains unchanged. Both former Governor Andrew Cuomo, now running for mayor, and current Governor Kathy Hochul have engineered the defeat of bills to restore EPP.

Nonetheless, temporary job guarantees have been maintained for some workers through repeated contract extensions, which follow the conditions in place when the contracts were first issued. However, this unsustainable status quo is reaching an end.

As far back as 2020, New York City took over ownership of one of the largest school bus operators, Reliant, and formed a non-profit NYCSBUS to avoid granting bus workers the pay and benefit package offered to city workers. Officials repeatedly cite the cost of school bus service, nearly \$2 billion a year, to justify the drive to make cuts. The same officials, however, rarely raise the fact that in New York City, home to Wall Street and 123 billionaires, vast social resources are available yet monopolized by the corporate and financial elite.

Now, with the school bus companies on the offensive, there are growing signs that this temporary arrangement is collapsing.

At the PEP meeting on Wednesday, the panel members passed a contradictory resolution, calling for a re-bid of the contracts while restoring employee protections, along with imposing service requirements on the contractors and requiring air conditioning in buses—something that is shockingly absent on many buses, despite often unbearable heat in New York City summers.

Beyond the issue of the EPP, bus workers are faced with a struggle to recoup what they lost in the aftermath of the betrayed strike, to say nothing of winning gains that allow them to cope with the soaring cost of living in New York. Since 2013, thousands of bus workers have lost their jobs, and the union has broken up an industry-wide contract into company-by-company pacts, facilitating major pay and benefit concessions.

A veteran school bus driver, now working for Little Lisa company in the Bronx, a subsidiary of Logan, told the WSWS at the PEP meeting, “In this job, we don’t get paid overtime. I have to get to work very early so I can make my first pickup at 6:30 a.m. The parent has to have the child ready. I am done in the morning at 9:00 a.m. and have to wait to drive again at 1:00 p.m., and then I am done at 4:00 or 5:00 p.m. So that is a 10-hour or more workday.”

The deterioration in job conditions has contributed to a driver shortage. Routing problems have plagued the network and led to spikes in delays and no-shows. Over

the last couple of years, some drivers have seen a doubling or even tripling of routes.

The attack on bus workers and students in New York City is but one element of a broad dictatorial offensive of an oligarchic elite, led by President Trump in collusion with the Democratic Party. While Trump is leading an unprecedented attack on public education, including dismantling the Department of Education, and threatening school children in New York and elsewhere with widespread hunger by cutting off food aid, the Democratic Party has overseen conditions locally where a shocking one in seven public school students lacks a permanent home, and 65,000 live in shelters.

Amid this broader crisis, the threats to jobs and schooling brought on by the inability of the city and the companies to find a way out of the busing quagmire makes it all the more imperative that bus workers, in alliance with parents and students, fight for a resolution based on the interests of the broad masses of workers, independent of both political parties and their backers in the union apparatus.



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