

New York City school bus drivers strike to defend jobs

By Sandy English
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Nearly 9,000 school bus drivers, members of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181, struck on Wednesday to ensure that job security provisions remain in New York City's contracts with the private bus companies that it uses to transport children.

The city's Department of Education (DOE), headed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg, one of the richest men on the planet, removed the provision, known as the Employee Protection Provision (EPP) in two bids for services it has solicited from bus companies. The EPP has been a part of bids since 1979 when drivers won the right after a 13-week strike.

This was a direct provocation against the bus drivers. The mayor and Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott claim that they have been forced into this action because of ruling by the State's Court of Appeals that bans the provision from contracts. Local 1181 argues that that this ruling applies only to contracts for pre-kindergarten students.

Without the EPP, potential bus contractors can substantially cut costs by refusing to hire better paid, senior drivers. Older, experienced bus drivers and matrons/attendants who take some of the city's most vulnerable children to and from school each day will lose their jobs or be forced to reapply for them with a new company paying a fraction of their current wages. Thousands of children will be put at risk if inexperienced and underpaid drivers take the wheel.

New York City has the largest school district in the United States with nearly 1.1 million students. For the last ten years, the Bloomberg administration has overseen a dismantling of public education. Hundreds of schools have been closed already and another 26 are slated to be shut down soon. Publicly funded and privately run charter schools have flourished. The DOE is now negotiating new evaluation standards for

teachers with the United Federation of Teachers that will almost certainly seek to threaten teachers with the loss of their jobs if their students perform poorly on standardized tests.

The removal of the EPP from school bus bids comes after a decade of assaults on teachers and other school employees. It is not credible that the mayor and his subordinates are concerned about the legality of the EPP, much less student safety, as they claim. Bloomberg and the DOE are consciously seeking to gut the wages and seniority rights of bus drivers as part of a much broader attack on the living standards of teachers and other city workers.

The strike could impact over 100,000 public-school and 50,000 parochial-school children, many of whom are special education students. According to the DOE, 3,000 of 7,700 routes were in operation on Wednesday.

Also on Wednesday, a group of 20 bus companies filed two complaints with the National Labor Relations Board alleging that the union had waged an unlawful secondary strike and was failing to bargain in good faith.

According to media reports, police were called to four garages in Brooklyn and Staten Island after picketers attempted to block buses being driven by scabs. No arrests were made. Bloomberg, in a threat to drivers, said, "We won't permit that kind of reprehensible conduct."

One driver on Facebook asked why some bus companies whose operators belong to the union were driving: "I want to know why Island Charter, Happy Child and First Step are out there driving. I called the union and I spoke to one of the delegates and he told me they are pre-k. I told the delegate that is undermining what we are trying to do and ... of course I didn't get an answer."

At a City Hall press conference on Wednesday afternoon, Bloomberg and Walcott attempted to minimize the impact of the strike, which has thrown working class families throughout the city into crisis as they try to find ways to take their children to school and get to work themselves.

Bloomberg claimed that on the basis of a partial sampling of city schools attendance was down by little more than 1 percent. Given that 85 percent of the city's students do not rely on yellow bus service to get to school, this had little significance.

Parents, the billionaire mayor declared, were being "very creative and inventive" and that while, "It's not going to be easy for them ... each day you should find more and more able to find some way to cope."

The reality was that for those most dependent upon bus service, special needs and disabled children, attendance was dramatically down. District 75, the school system's largest district which serves children with disabilities across the five boroughs, saw its attendance cut to little more than half.

Rejecting any suggestion that the city would negotiate with the union on restoring the Employment Protection Provision in the contract bids, Bloomberg insisted that any issues should be resolved between the union and the private contractors.

When a reporter pointed out that the last school bus drivers strike in 1979 lasted more than 13 weeks, Bloomberg responded, "I hope this does not last a long time, but it's not going to last more than June because that's the end of the school year."

The message was clear. Bloomberg is prepared to accept the strike continuing for five months with catastrophic disruptions for tens of thousands of the city's most vulnerable students and their families in order to drastically slash the wages and conditions of the school bus workers after current contracts run out.

Bloomberg, whose net worth has been placed at \$25 billion, repeatedly stressed the need to ax job protections for the bus workers and secure the lowest possible bids on school bus contracts in order to ensure that the taxpayer is not forced to "spend any more money than he or she has to." Last year, the mayor denounced a proposal to impose a marginal tax increase on the city's millionaires and billionaires to secure more money for education as "dumb," warning that it would cause people like himself to flee the city.

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