

New York bus drivers continue strike to defend jobs

By a reporting team
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Striking school bus drivers picketed bus garages throughout New York City Friday, and a delegation of drivers and supporters demonstrated outside the Brooklyn headquarters of the Department of Education (DOE).

The drivers' strike affects over 100,000 public and 50,000 parochial school children, many of whom are special education students. According to the DOE just 2,320 of its 7,700 bus routes were operating on Friday.

Multibillionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg when he put up for bid two bus contracts that do not guarantee job security provisions known as the Employee Protection Provision (EPP), forced the drivers out on strike. Workers have been protected by the EPP—which allows them to keep their seniority and pay scale regardless of which bus company has secured a contract with the city—for 33 years, since a 13-week strike won them the right. Drivers, bus attendants known as matrons, and mechanics are members of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181.

Without the EPP in place, the private bus companies that contract with the city will be able to pay far lower wages to their workers, destroying the living standards of drivers and endangering the children they transport by replacing experienced drivers with underpaid and untrained workers.

Bloomberg claims that a ruling by the New York State of Appeals in 2011 makes it illegal for the contract bid by the city to include the EPP. The union disputes the claim.

In fact, the provocation by the mayor is a part of an ongoing effort by both Democratic and Republican politicians in the city and in the state to significantly reduce pay and benefits for public-sector workers, including transit workers, clerical employees, teachers, fire fighters and sanitation workers.

A team of World Socialist Web Site reporters visited the picket line at the Atlantic Express bus service in Ridgewood, Queens on Metropolitan Avenue. There were about 50 workers on the line and a substantial police presence.

William Andino has been a bus driver for seven years. He has had many different jobs including a job in the garment district delivering uniforms. He said the strike is about job security, not about money. "I am 59 years old," he said. "I don't want another job. The only thing I want right now is to get this over and get back to work." William also works as a musician playing conga drums. "It's not much money, but it helps," he said.

William said that if bus contracts were put up for a bid, the workers would be paid less. "They want to pay \$10 to \$12 an hour. Some of the people here make \$35 thousand a year, but we all have kids."

William was also concerned about what will happen to the kids on these routes if experienced drivers are replaced. "If you do this job, you care about the kids. They [the mayor and city officials] don't. That's what irks me. When they want to hire people with no experience, that's insane."

Noting that the unions today were nothing but businesses, he said, "Everyone wants to make money and they make their money also. Workers are stuck in the middle between the unions, the company and the politicians. Politicians have been stealing for ages from everybody. Why do they want to take from the people who are just scraping by? There's no such thing as an American dream anymore."

WSWS reporters asked William about a rumor that the company was trying to hire scabs and train them in only three days. He said that, "all of our garages are union, so I don't know how they're going to do that."

He added that it was impossible to train replacements so quickly. “But that’s exactly what they’re going to do, do it quickly.”

Tom Wiley has worked as an instructor and examiner for 33 years. He said that the reason working people are under attack is that both parties are “corporate sponsored.” When asked if the strike is political, he said, “Of course it is. It has to be a political strike, because Mayor Bloomberg is doing this.”

He continued, “Look what they did to the post office. Work for your retirement for seventy years? That’s insane. If there wasn’t a cap on Social Security, people would retire at 50.”

When the WSWS reporters pointed out that wage cuts are an international problem, Tom readily agreed. “It is a global race to the bottom by the people who run things.” He pointed out that employers seeking higher profits are squeezing workers’ wages in Germany, where the unemployment rate is the lowest in Europe.

Both workers expressed hope that Mayor Bloomberg could be pressured. Tom pointed out that the mayor was successfully pressured to cancel the Marathon in the wake of Hurricane Sandy. A WSWS reporter pointed out that although Bloomberg might be pressured to cancel a sports activity, he would not give in to pressure to implement policies that represent a threat to corporate profits. It was Mayor Bloomberg who successfully lobbied Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo to veto legislation that would have guaranteed workers the Employee Protection Provision in future contracts.

Jimmy Cruz, who has been a bus driver for seven years, said, “I wonder what the mayor is doing right now. He’s probably someplace comfortable. Kids are supposed to mean everything to people, but he obviously doesn’t care. I believe the rich will not take away from the rich. The working people are always going to suffer.”

He added, “We just want job security. We’re not asking for more money.” He said it is important to “let people know what’s going on—like you guys are. That helps.”

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