

# New York school bus walkout continues amid injunction and strikebreaking threats

By Dan Brennan  
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Approximately 8,800 school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics continued their strike Friday, braving the chilling temperatures on picket lines across New York City. Mayor Michael Bloomberg forced the strike after removing from next year's request for bids the Employee Protection Provision (EPP), which guarantees that bus companies that win bids from the city use current drivers at the same rates of pay and benefits.

The strikers face the looming threat of a back-to-work court injunction. According to press reports, the National Labor Relations Board has completed an investigation requested by the school bus companies and is expected to issue a ruling next week on the legality of the work stoppage. If it rules it illegal, the NLRB would have to go to Brooklyn federal court to seek an injunction. Local 1181 and the companies are scheduled to meet Monday for negotiations. The Bloomberg administration, which has been intransigent in its refusal to continue the EPP, has called for the negotiations at Gracie Mansion, but is refusing to participate.

Meanwhile, the city and bus companies are attempting to break the strike. The Department of Education and the Mayor's Office are asking companies with drivers who are not striking to pick up additional students and to quickly train replacement workers in CPR and other required certifications. The city has also attempted haphazardly to arrange taxis for disabled students. Attendance has been down sharply, particularly for special-needs students, since the strike began last Wednesday.

WSWS reporting teams spoke with workers in the Bronx and Brooklyn about job conditions and the media vilification of their struggle. About 50 strikers stood in below-freezing temperatures at the garage of

Boro Transit in East New York in Brooklyn Friday morning. The group was thoroughly international: among the drivers and matrons were immigrants from Haiti, Jamaica, Greece, and Russia, as well as workers born in the United States.

The strikers were glad to see the *World Socialist Web Site* reporters because of the scanty coverage of the strike and the absence of almost any press reports sympathetic to the strikers. One striker said, "There is nothing on TV, and all the stuff in the newspapers about us is bad."

Asked what they wanted the public to know about the strike, driver Marian Pigano said, "People have to know that [New York City mayor] Bloomberg is the one who did this, not us. He talks with a forked tongue. It's not right what he's doing to all these families of the students. We ourselves are just working people. We get up in the morning, we do our job. We get classes; we're certified. What does he want, nonprofessional workers?"

"He got in his three terms, and he changed it back to two. And we're illegal? You know how much money the city is losing with this strike? Not because of us. There is a lot of waste that's caused them to put on extra buses. He wanted to break us first, but after us are the teachers. We hate Bloomberg. Bloomberg's got to go."

Jean Pierre, a driver for 17 years angrily denounced Bloomberg as a dictator, saying that he only represents the people with a lot of money, while the working people do not have a political party to represent their interests. "Like with any dictator, he has to be overthrown. The Egyptian people overthrew Mubarak. We all need to stick together to get rid of Bloomberg."

"How can he call us uncaring about these kids?" Jean Pierre added. "He's the one who doesn't care about

them. He's cutting after school programs, laying off teachers and closing public schools. They've closed 17 schools already and there will be 31 closed by September. They're turning them into charter school, just to make him more millions."

Another group of drivers spoke about the difficult working conditions. "We work hard under a lot of stress," said one. "Sometimes there's fighting on the bus—once a kid broke a window—it's very difficult to deal with especially when you are driving. And then we get fined for every little thing—if the bus breaks down and you have to take it to the shop, you lose pay for the time it took. If you get stuck in traffic and are late, you get fined \$200. Sometimes the fines are as high as \$800, and it all comes out of our paychecks. We have no sick days. And due to the stress of the job many of us have high blood pressure."

A matron added, "On the buses it's tough, sometimes we get treated like trash. I get spit at, hit, called names. We deal with it and we understand it. But we don't get paid enough. I'd like to see Bloomberg do this job.

"They talk about middle class jobs, but we're not the middle class, we're the working poor. We don't get paid enough, and they're trying to take away our money."

Renee Applebaum, on the picket line at the Atlantic Express bus yard in the Bronx, told the WSWS that she and her co-workers had previously been employed by the Varsity bus company and only had their current jobs because of the EPP provision that Bloomberg wants to scrap.

"The mayor is not thinking about the children," she said. "I only work with special needs children. There is no way their parents can get them to school. Special ed students have a lot of equipment that they need like oxygen tanks and wheelchairs.

"A lot of special ed students can only travel for a short time. One child had only 20 minutes on his portable oxygen tank. So from the time we got him on the bus, we only had 20 minutes to get to school before the oxygen ran out. Other children go to school with customized wheelchairs. These cannot be folded up. They cannot go on a city bus or in limos like Bloomberg says.

"I know a paraprofessional in special ed. She says she has only had 3 students since the strike started. This is out of a class of 16. Another friend said she put her

8-year-old son on a city bus as Bloomberg is telling parents to do. He didn't have a MetroCard, and he also had never been on a city bus alone before in his life. She could not give her child a cell phone because they are banned in school. He didn't get to school. He got lost and was driven all over the city. The 8-year-old child finally had to ask a stranger to borrow their cell phone to call home. Then his mother had to send a cab all over the city to find him. What a nightmare.

"The mayor hasn't thought it through when it comes to these children. They can't go on a public bus. Special ed students like routine. They like to sit in the same seat on the same bus every day. City buses can only take 2 wheelchairs. Autistic children may get anxious on a public bus, and people may make fun of them. Why are these students and parents being subjected to this?"

Renee continued: "There are two other unions who organize school bus drivers who said they would back us up. They are Teamsters 854 and another one, but they decided not to at the last minute. If the teachers had come out with us this wouldn't be happening. It would be over. And if the transit workers came out as well... But there are school bus driver unions who are still working."

"This is a political strike because Bloomberg isn't even going to talk, and we aren't asking for anything more. He just says this is the way it is going to be. This concerns the Teamsters and the TWU as well, but no one has come out to help us. We haven't seen one politician from anywhere. No one has come forward to say anything. This is our second week and there is no end in sight."

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