

Democrats join bid to strangle New York City bus drivers strike

By Bill Van Auken
7 February 2013

New York City's nearly 9,000 school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics, now into their fourth week of walking picket lines in the freezing cold, have built up a justifiable contempt and hatred for the Mayor, Michael Bloomberg.

From the outset, Bloomberg, worth some \$26 billion, has cast bus workers—making an average of \$35,000—as overpaid. He has lied about a previous court ruling supposedly preventing him from renewing the Employment Protection Provision that ensures workers can follow the work and keep their jobs, pay and seniority when busing contracts are awarded to other companies. And, worst of all, he has slandered the striking workers, claiming that they are responsible for depriving some 160,000 school kids of safe transportation and accusing them of not caring about the children—all the while seeking to bring in cut-rate bus service in order to cut costs and keep taxes on millionaires low.

Bloomberg is the personification of the super-rich layer of Wall Street swindlers and financial parasites that runs political life in New York and nationwide. This ruling oligarchy is determined to make the working class pay for the economic crisis that it created through the destruction of wages, benefits and social rights achieved through many decades of struggle.

While Bloomberg promotes this anti-working class agenda with all the arrogance of someone who believes he owns the city, this same agenda is shared by both big business parties and their elected politicians, from Barack Obama on down.

After funneling trillions of dollars in bailout money to the banks and the richest 1 percent, both the Democrats and Republicans now insist that society cannot afford anything but unemployment, poverty, austerity and wage cuts for the working class.

The assault on the jobs of New York City bus workers is part and parcel of a nationwide, corporate-driven attack

on public education, which has seen the closing of schools, teacher layoffs and increasing privatization. This is part of the sweeping cuts that threaten mass transit, health care and core social programs such as Social Security and Medicare.

This is why the struggle of the school bus workers has evoked powerful sympathy and support from working class New Yorkers who welcome someone standing up to the Bloomborgs of this world and know full well that what the striking drivers, matrons and mechanics face today, they will face tomorrow.

Strikers are conscious of this mass support in the working class and want to find a way to use it to break their isolation on the picket lines. The union that claims to represent their interests, however, is turned in the opposite direction.

Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 and the ATU nationally have forged an alliance with local Democratic politicians, particularly those vying to succeed Bloomberg as mayor in next fall's election, on a common platform that calls for shutting down the strike as quickly as possible.

They have invoked the decision of the National Labor Relations Board, which rejected the bus companies' claim that the strike was illegal and that the workers should be forced back to work, as another argument for calling off the strike and sending the workers back across their picket lines.

The front-runners in the contest for the Democratic mayoral nomination—Council Speaker Christine Quinn, Public Advocate Bill de Blasio and City Comptroller John Liu—have all issued virtually identical statements urging Bloomberg to accept the union's offer of an up to three-month "cooling off period" and negotiations on cost-cutting concessions that could end up gutting job and seniority guarantees and slashing wages and benefits.

None of these politicians, it should be noted, has spoken

out in direct defense of the right of the bus workers to keep the Employment Protection Provision and maintain their jobs, wages and seniority. Not even in this season of empty campaign promises will they do that.

As mayor, these candidates would all follow in the footsteps of the late Ed Koch, the former Democratic mayor who is now being elevated to sainthood by the big business media. In 1979, when school bus drivers last struck, Koch publicly denounced them as “goons” and “bastards” and used city employees and even Correction Department buses to scab on the strike.

In the end, the Democrats, from Obama, who is working with Republicans to slash trillions from social budgets, on down, are just as committed as the Republicans to defending the banks and corporations by placing the full burden of the economic crisis onto the backs of the working class.

The ATU has talked of mobilizing its friends in Albany and getting Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo to intervene. The fact is he already has. At Bloomberg’s request, he vetoed state legislation in 2011 that mandated the maintenance of the EPP in school busing contracts, thereby setting the stage for the current attack on bus drivers.

Their differences with the Republicans and Bloomberg are merely tactical. Instead of going for a confrontation with the unions, the Democrats seek their collaboration in implementing essentially the same policies. The union officialdom is a key constituency of the Democratic Party, which upholds the interests of this privileged strata at the expense of the workers. In the case of Local 1181, this would likely mean an assurance that dues money would keep flowing, even if it comes off of new-hires working part time and at half salary.

The decision of the NLRB, which is itself dominated by Democratic appointees of the Obama administration, reflects this division of labor. Rather than declaring the strike illegal and going for a court injunction to break it, this very political government agency left the task of strangling the workers’ struggle in the hands of the union leaders and the Democratic “friends of labor.”

These phony friends would quickly turn into vicious enemies if an effective struggle were waged to win the strike and mobilize the full support of the working class behind it. If teachers or transit workers were to take action in solidarity with the school bus drivers, they would fall afoul of the Taylor Law that denies public sector workers in New York State the right to strike. This law, which allows fines, firings and arrests, has been

supported by the Democrats in Albany and in New York City, and they would use it to in an attempt to repress genuine solidarity.

Similarly, the hands-off approach of the NLRB would be cast aside in the face of joint strike action, with rulings and injunctions against secondary strikes quickly invoked.

The determination of the school bus workers to fight for rights mirrors the anger building up among broad sections of working people, who together have the power to defy and defeat such measures.

This determination, however, stands in sharp contrast to the Local 1181 leadership, which is scurrying to end the strike without securing any agreement or guarantees outside of a deal to negotiate give-backs. Ending the strike on this basis would spell not only a defeat for these workers, but a setback for the struggles of the working class as a whole in defense of jobs, wages and social conditions.

Victory in this struggle requires a clear understanding of the strike’s political implications and the necessity of actively mobilizing the support of the working class as a whole.

It is to the teachers, transit workers and other sections of workers, students and youth that the school bus drivers must now turn, not to Democratic Party politicians, the AFL-CIO and other union officials, false friends who are determined to end the strike and suppress workers’ resistance.

Above all, this struggle must not be subordinated to unions’ political alliance with the Democratic Party and the capitalist profit system it defends.

The organization of the strike must be taken out of the hands of the ATU leadership through the establishment of an independent strike committee, democratically controlled by the rank and file. The task of this committee would be first and foremost to turn out to mobilize the immense sympathy and support that exists for the strike among millions of workers who welcome the fact that at last someone is taking a stand against Bloomberg and Wall Street.

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