

Striking New York City bus drivers march in defense of jobs

By a reporting team
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Thousands of striking bus workers and their supporters marched across the Brooklyn Bridge to City Hall Sunday to protest the attempt by New York's billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg to strip them of job protections that have existed in the city for nearly half a century.

The march and rally were held with the strike in its fourth week. The demonstration came just a day before new bids were to be submitted to the Department of Education for school busing contracts that will not include the Employment Protection Provisions (EPP) that were introduced in the 1960s and institutionalized following a 13-week strike in 1979.

The EPP ensures that experienced workers do not lose their jobs if their companies lose out in bidding for a new contract and that companies winning the bids hire them first with their seniority and existing wages and benefits intact.

This was the first major rally called by the union, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181, in nearly a month since the strike began. Drivers, matrons and mechanics who have been walking picket lines at bus yards in isolated corners of the city, where they are prevented from blocking scab buses being sent out daily, were clearly enthusiastic about coming together in greater numbers in the heart of the city.

Some carried hand-lettered signs expressing their anger at Bloomberg and the financial oligarchy that he both personifies and represents. One read, "Mayor: Retire a champ, not a chump—sign the contract."

Many, however, complained that the union called the action on a Sunday, when it would have the least impact and the lowest visibility, with the municipal and financial centers of lower Manhattan largely deserted.

Once it reached the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge, the march was funneled by large numbers of police into a

penned-in area on the sidewalk. The marchers were kept in two separate pens along Broadway, surrounded by police and metal barricades. The great majority could follow the proceedings on the stage set up at the southern end of City Hall Park only by watching images on a Jumbotron video screen.

The militancy and enthusiasm of the rank-and-file workers who marched across the bridge stood in stark contrast to both the actions and words of the union officials.

While the march had been billed as a show of support for the strikers and had supposedly been endorsed by other major unions, there was no serious mobilization of rank-and-file workers by any of these organizations. There were merely a handful of mid-level officials from the United Federation of Teachers, the Transport Workers Union, Service Employees International Union 32BJ and the Teamsters making an appearance.

From the platform, a long procession of union bureaucrats and local Democratic Party officials engaged in a series of chants, empty demagoguery and appeals to Bloomberg.

Local 1181 president Michael Cordiello set the tone by insisting that the union wanted to have a "heart-to-heart talk with Mayor Bloomberg" and noting that Bloomberg had shown he had a heart by supporting gun control and the banning of large-sized soft drinks.

While stating that the strike was about "pushing the working class down" and "working people against the elite," Cordiello ended his remarks with a call for Bloomberg to "do the right thing."

Local 1181, the ATU international and the New York City Central Labor Council have offered to end the strike and send the workers back to work without any concessions from the city. The "cooling-off period"

would last up to three months, during which the union would negotiate “cost-saving” concessions with the Bloomberg administration. City Hall has rejected this surrender, insisting that it will go ahead with accepting bids on the new contracts without the EPP.

Other union officials spoke demagogically about their support for the strikers, while urging workers to remain loyal to the local leadership. Larry Hanley, the president of the ATU international, said that the union’s 200,000 members “will be with you,” and Mario Cilento, the president of the New York State AFL-CIO told them, “You are not alone in this fight; the 2.5 million union members of this state are there with you.”

But the strikers could see the situation with their own eyes and were well aware that no attempt had been made to mobilize any section of the working class in their defense. They are quite conscious that what Bloomberg is doing to the bus workers will set the stage for deeper attacks on every other section of the working class in the city, and find it difficult to understand why the unions are doing nothing.

The reality is that the union bureaucracy in New York City—including that of the TWU, the UFT and other municipal workers unions, all of which have been unable to negotiate contracts—fears above all that the school bus strike can become the spark for a wider and more explosive struggle against the attacks on jobs, living standards, public education and other vital social services, thereby disrupting their own relations with the political establishment.

In all the words spoken by dozens of union officials and vote-grubbing Democratic politicians, there was not a hint of any strategy to defeat Bloomberg and win the strike. Instead, behind the shouted slogans about being “fired up,” what predominated was a plea by the labor bureaucrats to let them keep their seats at the table as decisions are made to drastically cut the living standards and conditions of the workers.

It has long been the modus operandi of the AFL-CIO and other unions to call these kinds of rallies as a cover for the final sellout of struggles. While the rally demonstrated the determination of the bus drivers, escorts and mechanics to fight, it also made clear that only way forward lies in mobilizing their strength, independent of the union, and turning out to the working class and the enormous support that exists

among municipal workers, teachers, parents and students and every other section of workers.

In waging this fight, New York City’s school bus workers are confronting not only Bloomberg and his underlings, but the entire capitalist economic and political setup in New York City and nationally. This system is defended by both major political parties, which claim unceasingly that, while stock prices and the fortunes of the rich soar, there is no money to meet the most essential social needs, including safe transportation for school children and secure jobs for workers.

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