

School bus strikers in New York City discuss their struggle

By a WSWWS reporting team
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Striking school bus drivers and matrons discussed their struggle during the march across the Brooklyn Bridge and rally at City Hall. Nearly 9,000 workers have been on strike since January 16 to defend job and wage protections being attacked by New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg.

During the rally Socialist Equality Party supporters distributed the WSWWS NYC School Bus Strike Newsletter, which included the SEP statement, “Mobilize the working class to defend New York school bus strike,” which urges drivers to form a rank-and-file strike committee, independent of the ATU, to fight for a far broader movement of the working class in defense of the strike.

Several strikers discussed the political issues in the struggle with reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*. Margaret, a matron at Hoyt Transportation in Brooklyn for 13 years, said, “I really don’t like what is going on here. We are doing a very good job. We deserve to keep our jobs, job security and wages. The reason Bloomberg and the city are doing this is to cut costs. But nothing good comes from trying to cut corners.

“Every worker needs to come out with us. They are hurting the working class. We get up early every morning to come to work and take care of school children. What do they want—to make us all welfare recipients?”

Another matron, Energe Nelson, commented, “I think the mayor wants to stop people from working. He wants to take our job security and our jobs. Other workers are affected by what is happening to the school bus drivers and matrons. The teachers have a fight themselves. Even hospitals are being shut down, like the Downstate Medical Center [Long Island College Hospital]. How can you pay your mortgage or support your kids when they want to cut back our pay and benefits?”

Carlos Rios, a bus driver with 13 years service, said, “What is happening to us is not right. With all the time we have put in taking care of children, they want to throw us to the curb. The politicians say they are about protecting the safety and wellbeing of our children but they are not.”

A driver with 23 years in the Bronx said, “We cannot go

back without the EPP. If we do go back, what do we accomplish? We will probably be in a worse situation—no, we definitely will be in a worse situation. We’re not rich, we’re just trying to make enough to live.”

When asked how he thought the strike could be broadened, he said, “It’s important that all unions in the city come out.”

One of the companies submitting bids to Bloomberg is transportation giant First Student. In suburban Long Island, ATU Local 1181 has signed contracts with First Student that only guarantee six hours of work a day.

Wilfredo, a young driver from the Bronx, said, “I used to work at First Student and they would only hire you part-time. We were making \$15.50 and no benefits and got so few hours we couldn’t afford the gas to get to work. And when you’re part time you don’t qualify for medical insurance. All Mayor Bloomberg is thinking about is the money and profits.”

Another young worker expressed frustration over the direction of the strike, noting that the ATU decided to hold the march on a Sunday, instead of during the work week, when it would have had a far greater economic impact and won more support from workers. “What impact is a protest on Sunday going to have? The ATU is not doing anything for us. We’re out here alone. I want us to do something that will have an impact.”

Another young striker said, “The media has tried to shut us out and a lot of the public doesn’t know what our struggle is about. But the teachers and the school bus strikers have the same cause. The teachers teach and we transport the students. We take care of the kids of New York City. But it is coming down to just two classes in the city, the rich and the poor.” Daniel Perez, an Atlantic Express driver, pointed out, “This Mayor Bloomberg is trying to cut down the working class and the middle class. The mayor changed the law to make sure he had a third term. Only a billionaire could do this. The EPP has been here since 1979. Why does he want to take this away now? He is one of the 1 percent and represents Wall Street. For them it is OK for the

banks to take billions. But he wants us on welfare.”

Roger Bozza, another Atlantic Express driver, explained, “When you bring people in to our company, they may have two days of experience, but they have to go through a six-month background checking process. This job costs you money to prepare and start up.

“Then you have to learn the directions to drive the routes in the area where you work. I started in the Bronx where I didn’t know the streets, but I had help from the other drivers. When you put people on for \$14 or \$15 an hour, they are miserable. No one can work for that little. Here you get no sick days. Having a decent wage gives you the incentive to get up so early and come to work.

“I am also worried we are going to get screwed out of our pensions. They say that now with people paying into the pension fund, full retirement benefits can be paid out for 13 years. But what happens if they stop paying into the fund? How soon will it all run out?”

“Every worker around here should drop everything and stand with us. There should be millions out here. There should be at least 20,000 out here today.”

Alicia Patterson is a driver with six years at the Ridgewood Atlantic Express yard. She said, “I feel like people should come down with us. There are a lot who are like us. Look at the Post Office. They are stopping Saturday service because Congress put them in a trick position where they had to pay up workers benefits way in advance. This is just another way of taking jobs from people who need a decent wage to support their families. It also gives money to the private companies that will take over the services of the postal workers. This is another way for the rich to get richer. “What is going on is that they are taking us on one by one. We should call out all the workers because it is the school bus drivers and matrons now, and you are next.”

Another driver said, “Bloomberg says we make too much money. I bring home \$513 a week after taxes, and I have to raise a family and pay all the bills and tolls. I can’t live without the EPP. If the mayor contracts out to the lowest bidder, we will all lose our jobs. If the city goes part-time like First Student, then we lose our medical care.”

He added, “Bloomberg and the Democrats and Republicans are all for the wealthy. And the union leaders like Hanley make \$285,000. How is that possible? Who decides on that? They are concerned about the membership shrinking because of the dues, which are \$51 a month. But the ATU has given up so much. Starting wage used to be \$17 an hour but Local 1181 brought it down to \$14.51. Now it takes three and a half years to get medical coverage for your family when it used to be a few months. If they give up the EPP when Bloomberg sells my job to another company, I’m gone.”

A seven-year driver for Consolidated in East New York, Charles Allen, commented, “Bloomberg can’t put saving the city money over the safety of the kids. Now the news reports that even the educational facilities we frequently take students to for field trips may be forced to shut down, like the Puppetworks theatre in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

“What hurts us is if other bus companies get the work contracts from the city, we have to follow the work but are then forced to start from the beginning if we don’t have the EPP. If I make top salary after many years, I would have to go back at \$12 an hour. That is why we are all out here. Bloomberg doesn’t know what it feels like to work from paycheck to paycheck. He is just going by the numbers.”

Asked what was needed to win the strike, Charles said, “We all need to unite. There should be teachers and transit workers out here. If Bloomberg gets his way with us, he is moving on the next target. Divide and then conquer, that is what it is.”

Roosevelt Janviel has been a driver for four years for Hoyt in Coney Island. “I don’t see any change in our strike situation for now. But we are trying. Bloomberg says the EPP is too expensive and is illegal. It is not true. He has the money. He just doesn’t want to spend it. I guess the union could accept something but not if it is cutting hours and wages. They are attacking everybody. All the parents and teachers need to get together. Everybody knows that Cuomo, Bloomberg, the politicians are not on our side.”

Mario, a driver for 12 years, said, “My question is if they are not going to give a contract with the EPP for the drivers, what happens to the drivers who have 29 or 30 years? Will they just get rid of them without any compensation?”

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