

Why the unions refuse to mobilize support for striking New York City bus drivers

By Fred Mazelis
12 February 2013

Sunday's march over the Brooklyn Bridge and rally at New York's City Hall showed the militancy of the striking bus drivers, matrons and mechanics as they continue their struggle for long-established job protections and all of their basic rights.

After four weeks, these 9,000 workers remain absolutely determined to win. They know that otherwise they face the destruction of both their jobs and conditions and rights won over many decades. The Bloomberg administration, seeking to rip up the Employee Protection Provision that was codified in the 1979 contract, will force these workers to accept part-time employment and poverty-level wages.

The strikers know they enjoy broad sympathy in the city, from parents and students as well as from hundreds of thousands of municipal employees and others—teachers, transit workers, sanitation workers and many more who are working without contracts as the billionaire mayor intensifies his attacks on all city employees.

This struggle is part of a broader fight against austerity, against a corporate-backed drive, carried out by both big business political parties, aimed at making the working class pay for the economic crisis through mass unemployment and budget cuts that threaten to destroy public services and basic social programs such as Medicare and Social Security.

And yet the anger and determination of the strikers at Sunday's rally stood in glaring contradiction to the almost complete absence of any representation of the hundreds of thousands of other workers who are on the front lines along with them in the fight against the Bloomberg administration.

There were no contingents of teachers, despite the fact that nearly 200,000 members of the United Federation of Teachers have been targeted for attack as

part of a nationwide assault on public education. There were no contingents of transit workers, the 35,000 members of Local 100 of the Transport Workers Union, now in their second year of working without a contract.

The absence of these workers was not because they or other city workers are indifferent to the struggle of the school bus drivers. Any doubts on that score would have been quickly dispelled by the non-stop honking of passing sanitation trucks, city buses and fire trucks near the rally.

No—the fact that teachers, transit workers, firefighters and others weren't marching Sunday was the result of a conscious decision by the unions that take their dues money and falsely claim to represent them. These unions turned out a tiny handful of functionaries at the rally on February 10, but they made sure that their members were not mobilized to attend the demonstration. As the school bus strike enters its second month, the union bureaucrats are worried above all that the strike might prove contagious, that a large and powerful group of city workers could get the idea that they should join up with the school bus drivers and matrons.

Instead of bringing these sections of the working class together, the unions turned to the Democratic politicians, who no less than Bloomberg represent the interests of the banks and big business.

They brought Democratic mayoral aspirants like former Comptroller William Thompson and current Comptroller John Liu onto the platform at the rally to make empty and demagogic promises of support to the strikers. You could not tell the difference between the speeches of the union officials and the Democrats because there was no difference. They all pretend to be on the side of the workers, but their actions tell another

story.

Instead of mobilizing workers in strike action and independent political struggle, the union speakers joined with the Democrats on the rally platform last Sunday to talk up next November's elections. They cynically used the justified outrage of the school bus strikers at Bloomberg's attacks to whip up support for the Democrats who are trying to succeed him.

The unions are working to solidify their longstanding alliance with the Democratic Party, and it is an alliance against their own members. They will be seeking a deal with Thompson, Liu or City Council Speaker Christine Quinn or Public Advocate Bill de Blasio, to negotiate away all the hard-won gains of generations of workers, as long as their own privileges are maintained.

Who are the "pro-labor" Democrats? As a recent article in the *New York Times* reported, they are all receiving huge campaign contributions from the city's billionaires and multi-millionaires, who are more than confident that these would-be successors to Bloomberg will defend their interests, not those of New York's working people.

The school bus workers and all sections of the working class must draw the lessons of the last four weeks of struggle. Right now the ATU, working in the closest collaboration with other unions, is doing everything possible to keep the strike isolated, to starve the workers back to work as they dole out a pitiful \$150 a week in strike benefits, and to plead with Bloomberg for a deal that will send the strikers back without winning their demands, while they negotiate "cost savings" that will make the workers pay for the city's fiscal crisis.

If workers wait for the unions to conduct a struggle they will wait until they have been defeated. It is necessary for the school bus strikers to act independently of the union hierarchy, to reach out to transit workers, teachers and other city workers. It is necessary for transit workers, teachers and others to likewise take independent action in opposition to the treachery of the pro-capitalist and pro-Democratic Party organizations whose main task is to prevent strikes or to strangle them if they cannot be prevented.

An independent strike committee is needed to take the struggle forward. Supporters of the school bus workers must also form committees and link up with the strikers in joint action, winning mass support and

mobilizing it in the street and in strike action. This is a political fight that requires a political strategy. A common struggle in defense of jobs and living standards raises the urgent need for the organization of the working class as an independent political force, committed to a socialist program, the economic reorganization of society to meet human needs and not the profit interests of the super-rich.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>