

The Boston school bus drivers' wildcat strike

By Jerry White
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On Tuesday, hundreds of Boston school bus drivers carried out an unauthorized wildcat strike. The action reflects deep social tensions that exist not only in Boston, Massachusetts, but throughout the country and internationally.

Workers said they walked out because they had been cheated on their paychecks and subjected to speedup, electronic monitoring and abuse by Veolia Transportation, the multinational corporation that recently won the school district contract to transport 33,000 students.

The action caught the entire political establishment, including the union that ostensibly represents the 700 drivers, by surprise. On Tuesday morning United Steelworkers Local 8751 President Dumond Louis and other officials attempted to order workers back to work. They were shouted down by drivers who said the union, which was taking money out of their pockets, had done nothing to defend them.

Officials from the city, management and the media reacted with rage, denouncing workers for supposedly abandoning school children and being “selfish.” At a City Hall press conference, Democratic Mayor Tom Menino denounced the “illegal work stoppage,” threatened workers with legal action, and declared, “We will not allow them to use our students as pawns.”

Coming from a mayor who has slashed millions in public school funding and laid off hundreds of teachers and school employees, the suggestion that it is school bus drivers who do not care about children is especially rich. Moreover, while Menino was castigating drivers for shutting down the school system, the entire federal government has been shut down by the Obama administration and Congressional Republicans as they work out new attacks on health care and retirement programs.

As if it were not enough to be slandered by the employers and political establishment, the workers also

faced the scorn of the United Steelworkers union, which was angered that the drivers' job action would disrupt the union's cozy relationship with Veolia, the school authorities and City Hall. Instead of defending the strikers and explaining their grievances to the public, the USW joined management and the mayor's denunciations, paving the way for the victimization of the striking workers.

“The USW does not condone the current action,” USW District 4 Director John Shinn declared in a statement, adding that the union had “instructed all members of Local 8751 to immediately cease this strike” and “resume work as soon as possible.”

The drivers have now gone back to work, but the social and political significance of the act remains, and the lessons must be drawn.

It is an extraordinary fact that for more than 30 years, virtually every manifestation of organized working-class resistance and class struggle has been suppressed in the United States. This in a country that for more than a century, going back all the way to the 1870s, had seen decade after decade of mass strikes and violent social protest.

Since the mid-1980s, however, there has been a virtual disappearance of strikes. What accounts for this?

The disappearance of overt forms of working-class struggle is bound up with the collapse of the AFL-CIO and what was known as the American labor movement, and its integration into the structures of corporate management and the state.

The transformation of the trade unions is bound up with both objective and subjective factors. First, the globalization of capitalist production and the decline of American capitalism, which rapidly developed from the 1980s onward, undermined the program of national reformism on which the unions were based. The nationally based unions had no response to the ruling

elite's ability to move production out of the US and exploit a worldwide pool of labor.

The officials who controlled these organizations, already committed to a defense of the capitalist system, responded to these developments by embracing a corporatist program of "labor-management partnership." They abandoned even the minimal function of the unions as defensive organizations of the working class.

The erstwhile union "bureaucrat" has become a businessman whose high salary and upper middle-class lifestyle depend on policing the workforce and cutting labor costs in order to boost corporate profits. Union executives were rewarded with shares, seats on corporate boards and the control of multibillion-dollar pension funds, becoming secondary shareholders in the process of exploitation.

The class struggle has not disappeared in America. However, for the last three-and-a-half decades, it has been waged on only one side.

As a consequence, the American working class has suffered a historic regression in its living standards and social position, while inequality has reached levels unparalleled in modern American history.

Between 1979 and 2012, the wage of the median worker in the US rose by only five percent, despite an increase in productivity of 75 percent, while the income of the richest one percent has quadrupled.

Signs of popular discontent are building up everywhere in America. The actions of the Boston workers are only one initial expression of the seething anger in the social powder keg of America. Such actions will be repeated and developed throughout the country.

The Socialist Equality Party welcomes and encourages every manifestation of opposition. But if these struggles are to be successful, they must be based on a clear perspective.

First, for these struggles to develop, they must be conducted independently of and in opposition to the official unions. Workers must be freed from any organizational control of these anti-labor organizations and develop new forms of democratic and popular organization, including factory and workplace committees, to conduct their struggles.

Second, workers must recognize the connection between the conditions they face and the capitalist

system, a society based on the enrichment of a tiny handful at the expense of the working class that collectively produces society's wealth. The defense of every serious social right of the working class poses the necessity for a struggle against the domination of the corporations and banks over economic and political life.

Flowing from this, the workplace and industrial struggles must assume a political character. Workers must break from the two parties of big business, the political defenders of capitalism, and build a mass political movement whose aim is the fight for workers' power. The working class can only break the stranglehold of the corporations and banks by establishing a workers' government and reorganizing economic and political life along socialist lines to meet human needs, not private profit.

Finally, the battle facing American workers is part of a broader struggle of the international working class. Workers in the US, China, Mexico, Brazil and all over the world confront the same capitalist enemy and must unite internationally in order to coordinate their struggles against the globally organized corporations that are attacking their jobs and living standards.

To advance this perspective, a new leadership and political movement of the working class is necessary. That is the Socialist Equality Party.

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