

New York City school-bus workers' union ignores strike vote, accepts sellout deal

By Steve Light
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Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1181 has signed a tentative agreement with two-dozen private school-bus companies contracted by New York City public schools. The ATU ignored the overwhelming strike mandate last month by thousands of New York City school-bus workers who are determined to fight low wages, loss of overtime pay and increasingly stressful working conditions.

Michael Cordiello, the president of the local, told a January 27 union meeting that a tentative deal had been reached and there would be no strike. Only 200 of the 13,000 drivers, attendants and mechanics attended the meeting, underscoring the deep hatred rank-and-file workers have for the ATU.

In a January 30 letter to local union members, Cordiello made it clear that the deal was not even finalized before the union called off the strike. The letter said “attorneys on both sides [would] review the language. Once finalized all parties will sign the agreement.”

The letter then made it clear the union bureaucrats would once again try to ram the sellout through by giving school-bus drivers as little time as possible to study and discuss it. After the deal was finalized, Cordiello said, “the delegates will be bringing the agreement to your properties for your review and any questions you may have before taking a vote.”

This is a reprise of the same anti-democratic methods used by the ATU to end the month-long strike in 2013 and push through a deal that betrayed the demands of school-bus drivers. School-bus drivers conducted a determined strike against billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who revoked the Employment Protection Plan (EPP), a clause won in a bitter 1979 walkout that protected wages, benefits and seniority of school bus workers even if they transferred to another company.

The ATU, the United Federation of Teachers and other city unions did nothing to mobilize the 1.3 million union members in the city. Instead, they did everything to isolate and wear down the strikers, who only received a pitiful \$150 a week in strike benefits from a fund that had not been tapped since the 1979 strike.

Then, after four weeks on strike, Cordiello and ATU International President Larry Hanley informed the members during a 45-minute teleconference call that the executive board had suspended the strike, without a membership meeting or a vote. To justify this despotic move, ATU officials claimed that they had gotten promises from various Democratic Party candidates for mayor, including de Blasio, to “revisit the issue of the EPP” if they were elected.

Of course, these promises were worthless. Six years on, there is no EPP and conditions have substantially worsened. Thousands lost their jobs. Some were rehired at much lower pay. Others were simply replaced by inexperienced newcomers at wages half of what had been standard, with few or no benefits. Competition between companies, based on low-bid contracting by the city, has resulted in significant consolidation, as companies closed, merged, or merely changed their names. This process has been associated with repeated attacks on workers' pay and benefits.

Cordiello said the new contract would bring a raise of a little over 2 percent for each of five years, a de facto cut in real wages in a city with some of the highest living costs in the world. He claimed the union had resisted demands by the companies not to pay overtime wages. Cordiello did not explain how or if the union would get the companies to pay overtime wages already owed to workers.

The bus companies only compensate drivers and

attendants for driving time; the time workers must wait in their buses until school lets out or during field trips is not counted. The pay of bus attendants, who ride along with drivers and attend to the special needs of students, would only be boosted up to the poverty wage of \$15 an hour.

The low pay and long hours have caused a large turnover and shortage of experienced drivers. This, in turn, has brought about a notable decline in the quality of service. Buses are now often late, and complaints by parents and teachers have surged.

The disciplining of bus workers has been stepped up since the 2013 strike. In just 12 months, from December 1, 2014, to December 2, 2015, there were 945 drivers and escorts suspended or fired, according to the *New York Post*. This compares to 1,300 disciplined in the five years between 2008 and 2012.

The ATU has continued to peddle the lie that the EPP can be won back by appealing to Democratic politicians like Mayor de Blasio. In June 2018, de Blasio announced a so-called “Experienced School Bus Worker Provisions,” falsely advertised as a restoration of the EPP but applying to only a small number of workers and enforcing a two-tier pay system. In any event, the State Appeals Court sided with the companies and rejected the proposal. Democratic Governor Cuomo also vetoed a bill to restore the EPP passed by the state legislature.

Lony, a school bus driver with 15 years at Consolidated Bus Company, said he was especially angry about not getting the overtime workers are supposed to get. “The Board pays for it, so the company is pocketing it.” Lony also denounced the phony promises of local and state Democrats. “I don’t believe in Cuomo. He hasn’t done anything for us since the last strike we had in 2013.”

The strike vote by school-bus workers is a part of growing mood of militancy among workers throughout the US and the world, from the strikes by teachers in India, Berlin and the US and the Yellow Vest protests in France to the rebellion of workers in Matamoros, Mexico. In Providence, Rhode Island, school-bus workers struck for three weeks in October in defense of defined pension benefits, but Teamsters Local 251 betrayed the struggle and imposed a 401k employee contribution plan.

During the 2013 New York City school-bus strike,

the Socialist Equality Party’s fight for rank-and-file committees in opposition to the ATU bureaucracy won a powerful response from school-bus workers.

A rank-and-file committee of school-bus drivers was formed, which discussed and debated crucial political issues for developing a new industrial and political strategy for the working class. The SEP warned that appeals to the Democrats, whether Obama, Cuomo or de Blasio, were self-defeating. Instead, the committee issued calls to other city workers, including sanitation workers, transit workers, firefighters and teachers, to join in a common struggle with school-bus workers.

Rank-and-file committees are more necessary than ever at New York’s school-bus yards, in the schools and communities where parents, students and teachers face the same struggle against attacks on public education, austerity and social inequality. Workers should form these committees to prevent the union from stampeding them to vote without sufficient time to discuss the contract, which should be rejected on these grounds alone.

Workers must reject the lies by the Democrats, the Republicans and the union executives like Cordiello who claim there is no money to vastly improve public education and the livelihoods of all school workers in a city with 103 billionaires, the most in the world. School-bus drivers should spearhead the fight to mobilize the millions of workers in the city, public and private sector, UPS, Amazon and other workers, to carry out a frontal assault on the vast fortunes of the corporate and financial elite and redirect these resources to meet society’s needs.

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