



EDUCATION

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What the Looming NYC School-Bus Strike Can Teach Us About the Real Impact of 'Austerity'

Those who claim to care about our children's safety often refuse to invest in it.

January 9, 2013 | The potential school bus strike looming over New York City right now is important. It is important regardless of where in the United States you live, and whether or not you have children. It is



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important even if you're not a school-bus driver, or a union member or a child with special needs. The battle between the city and the bus drivers represents the supremacy of budgets over quality of life. It illustrates what happens when

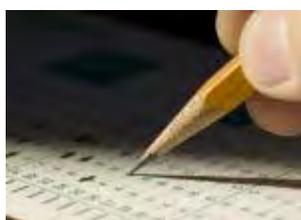
communities, jobs and families are devalued, marginalized and destroyed while the language of austerity reigns, infallible. And it illuminates the hypocrisy of those in power who claim to care for our children's safety but refuse to invest in it.

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The dispute is simple -- it's about saving money. As New York City schools chancellor David Walcott has noted, the city has operated its school-bus contracts without any "significant competitive bidding" for 33 years. During that time, something called "Employment Protection Provisions" ensured job security for senior workers, even if the city changed bus companies -- meaning that experienced drivers were rehired year after year. But the contracts have gotten too pricey; more than twice what Los Angeles pays per student -- and the city now plans to offer the contracts to the "lowest responsible bidder." The union representing the school-bus drivers, Local 1181 of the Amalgamated Transit Union, is asking for Employment Protection Provisions to be included in the new contract to protect workers from losing their jobs to newer, cheaper labor. But due to a state court of appeals decision last year, in which the court ruled to exclude the provisions based on competitive bidding laws, the city says its hands are tied.

The city also denies the union's claims that the new contracts would decrease safety by replacing experienced drivers with new ones, insisting that training standards would be equally rigorous under the new contracts. The routes in question are 1,100 out of the city's total 7,700, serving 22,500 students with disabilities. If the strike happens, all 152,000 children who depend on buses to get to school would be affected.

Part of the significance of this dispute is that while the importance of job protections for current bus drivers is difficult to quantify, the city's need to reduce the budget is as plain and clear as the budget numbers themselves. In the face of the millions of dollars the city stands to save with cheaper contracts, why should it matter if, for example, 22,500 special-needs students find themselves with brand-new bus drivers one day?

It matters because how we treat those who care for certain children reflects how we value those children. It creates a system in which workers entrusted to be responsible for a child's safety are utterly replaceable in the name of protecting the bottom line. Bus drivers and matrons greet children in the morning and return them home in the



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afternoon and students with disabilities require specific knowledge, care and attention. Routine and stability are important to all children, but especially so to certain populations of special-needs children, including those with autism or emotional/behavioral disorders.

I once had a student with autism who would arrive at school crying if any part of his routine had been altered on the bus; it could take him hours to calm down, and his whole day was thrown off from the start. Prioritizing low prices over quality and consistency devalues children, especially vulnerable children without resources, support or advocates. As minor as it may seem, a bus driver or matron can truly provide a sense of safety for a child, something we have spent the last month engaged in national conversation about, in the wake of the Newtown shootings.

While we're talking about safety, a close look at the contingency plan that will take place in the event of a strike reveals a blatant disregard for the overall safety of the city's children. Those who ride the bus would receive Metrocards to travel to school, but only the parents of K-2nd graders would receive an additional Metrocard so they could escort their child on the subway. That means Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Walcott would be sending children as young as third-graders -- typically 8- and 9-year-olds -- to ride the subways by themselves, unaccompanied, if their parent or guardian could not afford a Metrocard themselves. Afterschool programs would continue as usual, which would leave those young children traveling home alone well after dark. All in the name of the budget.

Bloomberg claims the saved money would be reinvested in the school system, but given his track record, there is little reason to trust his commitment to investing in the city's children. He has closed at least [140 schools](#) and sought to lay off [thousands of teachers](#). This past spring, [I wrote](#) about his effort to eliminate over 200 afterschool programs, which would have deprived 47,000 children of programs that provide academic and artistic enrichment to low-income populations and students of color. Although Bloomberg [argues](#), "We have an obligation to use our money effectively," he has yet to be more specific on how exactly the money would be reinvested to classrooms.

Given Bloomberg's history of attacking teachers unions (the latest of which came January 7, with his [likening of the UFT to the NRA](#)), we shouldn't be surprised by his treatment of the Amalgamated Transit Union. The specifics of the options for negotiating are complicated, due to the court [decision](#) last year regarding busing contracts. But the anti-union rhetoric employed in the city's press materials regarding the strike feel like a continuation of the escalating attacks on unions all over the country. The value of job security and the importance of these jobs for the union members has been nearly erased from the conversation. Bus drivers hoping to keep their jobs after years of working are cast as selfish and unreasonable in a landscape of budget cuts and the "lowest responsible bidder."

What makes the school-bus dispute even more catastrophic is the systematic devaluation of neighborhood schools that accompanies it. New York City proudly operates a "choice" system, a trend emphasized all over the country by pro-charter, pro-privatization enthusiasts (the importance of "choice" was a consistent talking point throughout the 2012 presidential election).

The choice program -- Public School Choice or PSC -- essentially [encourages students](#) to transfer from their zoned, or neighborhood, schools into better schools elsewhere in the city if their neighborhood school has low-graduation or low-proficiency rates. In other words, if a child's community school is "failing," the city has structures and supports to transfer the child elsewhere; meanwhile, those "failing" schools, as previously mentioned, are often closed, gutted or left to struggle. If neighborhood schools were prioritized over choice, New York City students would be attending schools in their own communities, not far from where they live. Instead, they are bused all over the five boroughs. Similar reform models are being [pioneered all over the country](#) by organizations like StudentsFirst, presumably in places that don't have New York City's robust public transit system. Where would a school bus strike leave them?

As assaults on public education, social programs and union jobs escalate, the potential school-bus strike is significant, both for its immediate consequences and for the battle it symbolizes. It distills the

risk our city officials are willing to take with our kids in order to trim the budget, and it highlights the fact that job security is the first thing to go and the last thing that workers are entitled to expect in our market-driven culture. The most vulnerable children in this scenario -- those with disabilities and those with working parents -- are often invisible; adults rarely have to think about how a kid's day starts and whether or not they are being supported. But if there's a strike, all those students will suddenly be visible -- they will all be riding the subway. Our children are not abstractions or political talking-points or faceless dollar signs. And soon, the city's residents may have to face the results of policy that values the bottom line over quality of life.

Molly Kniefel is a writer, comic, and co-host of Radio Dispatch, a thrice-weekly internet radio show. She also teaches drama after school.

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