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Divide-and-Conquer Plan: Labor Stopped It Before; Now UFT Being Tested

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OSA Chair Bob Croghan

Once upon a time, a union-buster came into town seeking to help a bus company make money. Harry Weinberg was his name and he had a plan.

In 1962, our city and state were served by private bus lines on many routes. The Bronx was served by Surface Transit, and Manhattan by the Fifth Avenue Coach and Omnibus Corporation. Other lines covered Westchester.

The fare then was 15 cents a ride, but Harry wanted 20 cents or more, and he knew just what to do if he didn't get it.

Went After Older Workers

Harry fired 29 elderly or partially disabled workers and ended pension payments to 1,200 retired bus workers. In case the union representing those workers missed the point, Harry also scheduled another 1,500 job losses. The plan was to target the older workers so the company (in the days before Federal law prohibited such actions) could save on pensions nearly earned.

My father was one of the men targeted. He had become a trolley car driver when he was a young man fresh off the boat from Ireland. By 1962, he was 59 years old, operated a bus and was due a pension as early as 62 years of age (unless he was fired or laid off first).

The Mayor of our city in 1962 was Robert Wagner and he opposed Henry Weinberg's plan, not only because it was unjust, but also because it led to a strike that looked to never end.

The Daily News excoriated the strikers and demonized the Transport Workers Union leaders, especially one

fellow named Michael Quill.

It is now 48 years later and a young Assemblyman named Jonathan Bing has proposed a bill in Albany to help get rid of older teachers. Mr. Bing is just as good at arithmetic as Harry Weinberg ever was. He stated "you need to cut your budget" and "two junior teachers equal one senior teacher."

In 1962, Mike Quill insisted that Harry Weinberg could fire all the older workers he wanted, but that he would never be allowed to operate a bus in New York City thereafter.

This year, instead of a friendly Mayor concerned for justice due to workers, we have a wealthy Mayor who uses pet legislators, Schools Chancellors, "Young Teachers Project" skills and the media to seek to set the young teachers against their older colleagues. It won't work.

A Happy Ending in '62

My father was not fired in 1962, nor did he lose his pension. After 30 days he was called back to work by the union. Harry Weinberg no longer ran the bus company. Instead of Fifth Avenue Coach, my father now worked for MaBSTOA, the Manhattan and Bronx Surface Transit Operating Authority.

The senior bus drivers had been saved by the Transport Workers Union, the Central Labor Council, the Teamsters, all of the other unions in New York City, and the State Legislators.

Harry Weinberg wanted to run his buses with only young, healthy drivers, and in return he got to run no buses at all. Mayor Bloomberg wants to run our schools with only young, healthy Teachers.

If Mayor Bloomberg thinks that having his spokespersons seek to divide the UFT (young against old) will work, he should take a city bus ride.

Editor's note: Mr. Croghan is the chairman of the Organization of Staff Analysts.