**Headline:** How Outsourcing Threatens America’s Safety

By Tom Conway

**Author Bio:** Tom Conway is the international president of the [United Steelworkers Union (USW)](https://www.usw.org/).

**Source:** Independent Media Institute

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by the* [*Independent Media Institute*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/)*.*

**Tags:** Labor, Economy, Activism, Politics, Education, Prison Reform, Health Care, Human Rights, Social Benefits, Community, Opinion, North America/United States of America

**[Article Body:]**

Early in the school year, a kindergartner on Joni Meyer’s school bus got motion sickness and threw up all over himself—and his brother, his cousin and his laptop.

Meyer pulled over, soothed the anguished child, cleaned everybody up as best she could and then drove the bus to school.

Over 34 years, Meyer has served as chauffeur, counselor, confidant, nurse and guardian angel to countless children like these in Bay City, Michigan. She’s skillfully navigated a 35-foot, 14-ton bus over serpentine roads and through treacherous winter storms, safely delivering what she calls “our precious cargo” to schools and football games. Now, in gratitude for Meyer’s dedication, officials in the Bay City Public Schools intend to kick her to the curb.

The school district recently notified Meyer and her 25 coworkers, represented by United Steelworkers (USW) Local 7380, of plans to eliminate their jobs and [outsource](https://www.wnem.com/2022/04/12/bus-drivers-union-protests-bcps-explores-privatizing-transportation-department/) transportation to a for-profit company. By continuing down this road, they’ll join the ranks of shortsighted employers who [auction off crucial services to the lowest bidders](https://thenewpress.com/books/privatization-of-everything), potentially saving a few bucks but gambling on safety.

Out-of-town drivers will never know Bay City’s rural roads or care about the community’s 8,150 students like Meyer and her coworkers, some of whom log upward of 150 miles during workdays that—because of split shifts—begin at 5 a.m. and end 12 hours later.

“I really enjoy my job. I enjoy my children. They’re sort of like extended family to us,” said Meyer, Local 7380’s unit president and the district’s second-most-senior driver, who wonders where a private contractor would even find replacements.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, school districts around the country have [struggled](https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2021/10/11/bus-driver-shortage-stresses-rural-school-districts) to recruit and retain drivers. Because of the shortage, some districts [closed schools](https://www.pahomepage.com/vaccinate-nepa/delaware-valley-school-district-closed-due-to-lack-of-bus-drivers/) or [cut service](https://www.cbsnews.com/pittsburgh/news/pittsburgh-public-schools-transportation-changes-bus-shortage/) while others [called in the National Guard](https://www.businessinsider.com/why-the-national-guard-is-driving-school-buses-labor-crisis-2021-12) for help, [put teachers behind the wheel](https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/school-district-looks-teachers-fill-bus-driver-shortage) or [paid parents](https://www.phillyvoice.com/school-bus-driver-shortage-philly-public-schools-pay-parents-drive-students-incentives/) to transport their own kids. So far this year, [bus companies contracted](https://www.capitalgazette.com/education/ac-cn-bus-shortage-0409-20220426-w4ighoum3vf7rbm6ltwjuydnta-story.html) by one Maryland school district missed more than 3,000 trips, leaving hundreds of students and parents in the lurch.

Bay City already has the dedicated, reliable workforce that other school districts crave. Teachers, [elected officials](https://www.mlive.com/news/saginaw-bay-city/2022/04/your-solidarity-is-amazing-bay-city-and-county-officials-show-support-for-protesting-school-bus-drivers.html), other community leaders and parents are rallying around the drivers, demanding the school district keep them on the job and avert the potential nightmare contracting out would bring.

“It’s terribly sad and unfortunate and quite disappointing because it’s going to rock these kids’ boats. Some of these kids come from homes that aren’t really stable. This is one stable thing they have in their lives,” Kristin McDonell, a Bay City parent, said of district drivers. “I trust these drivers. They’re part of our backbone. It means a lot to them to be contributing to their community in this way.”

“The school district is not putting the children’s best interests first,” added McDonell, who worries about whether contractors would properly train their employees or provide the same drivers on a daily basis, let alone find candidates willing to “invest their whole heart in the job” like Meyer and her colleagues. “From what I’ve read, outsourcing usually does not end very well. It’s a rocky road.”

The Washington State Utilities and Transportation Commission recently approved a $198,000 settlement with a school bus contractor that racked up [396 violations](https://www.theolympian.com/news/local/article260386257.html), including failure to screen drivers for drugs, while officials in other parts of the country have contended with contract drivers who [drank alcohol](https://www.greenbaypressgazette.com/story/news/education/2022/04/19/lamers-bus-driver-fired-drinking-beer-green-bay-school-field-trip-to-madison/7367769001/) on the job and [left a child behind](https://news.yahoo.com/pennsylvania-bus-driver-fired-child-185641033.html) at the bus garage at the end of the run.

As horrifying as these incidents are, they only begin to describe the consequences of privatization the public faces every day. Outsourcing imperils safety and quality in numerous other fields—across the public, nonprofit and private sectors—because contractors put the money motive ahead of all else.

Studies show that profit-driven private prisons [lock people up for longer periods](https://news.wsu.edu/press-release/2020/09/15/privatized-prisons-lead-inmates-longer-sentences-study-finds/) and experience [higher rates of violence](https://oig.justice.gov/reports/2016/e1606.pdf#page=2), [among other](https://www.aclu.org/issues/smart-justice/mass-incarceration/private-prisons) problems, compared to government-run facilities. Municipalities that [privatized](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/towns-sell-their-public-water-systems--and-come-to-regret-it/2017/07/07/6ec5b8d6-4bc6-11e7-bc1b-fddbd8359dee_story.html) their water systems saddled residents with poorer service, along with other setbacks, and [universities](https://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2021/10/20/SFU-Cleaning-Cafeteria-Staff-Should-Be-In-House-Employees/) that outsourced security and cafeteria jobs created [low-wage shadow workforces](https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2019-12-01/university-of-california-outsources-jobs), exacerbating inequality in their communities.

“Choose wisely, because cheaper does not mean better. You get what you pay for,” cautioned Tyson Bagley, president of USW Local 326, who’s worked to end the contracting out of maintenance workers at the Phillips 66 refinery in Rodeo, California.

When he joined the refinery about 10 years ago, only a fraction of maintenance workers belonged to the union because the company preferred to rely on contractors. But that led to quality-control and safety problems in what’s already a hazardous environment, Bagley said, noting contract workers had little investment in the work because they might be assigned to the refinery one day and another location the next.

In 2015, the USW and the company began collaborating to bring maintenance work back in-house. Now, most maintenance personnel are USW members, and “our quality control has been almost perfect,” Bagley said.

“We’re the best trained, safest workers,” he explained of his union siblings. “We know the facility. We know the equipment. This is our house. We’re going to make sure it’s done right.”

Meyer and her coworkers are circulating petitions, walking informational picket lines and taking other steps to save safe, dependable bus transportation in Bay City.

Their supporters, like McDonell, warn that outsourcing will only disrupt the district’s family atmosphere and create new headaches, especially for parents fearful of putting their children in the care of rented drivers.

“It’s a bad deal,” McDonell said. “It’s wrong. It’s totally wrong.”