

UPS fires 250 workers in Queens, New York over drivers' walkout

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United Parcel Service fired another 16 delivery truck drivers last week for engaging in a 90-minute strike at its Maspeth facility, in the New York City borough of Queens, to protest the dismissal of a fellow employee. On March 31, UPS, one of the largest and most profitable delivery services in the world, announced it would fire 250 workers for the alleged “illegal work stoppage” on February 26.

The conflict began with the February 14 firing of Jairo Reyes, an employee with 24 years experience, following a dispute over work schedules. There are reports Reyes was targeted for being a “union activist.” He was dismissed summarily, without a hearing, in violation of the “innocent until proven guilty” clause in the contract.

In response, delivery truck drivers at the facility staged the protest strike on February 26. The company retaliated by firing all 250 workers. At least 35 have since been dismissed, while the remainder of workers were told they would lose their jobs once replacements were trained.

UPS cited a no-strike clause in its contract with the Teamsters union to justify the mass firings. In fact, the contract states strike action may be undertaken if the company violates the contract.

Statements from workers indicate that the walkout was the culmination of intense speedup and harassment by the company, which repeatedly uses alleged, minor infractions of work rules to intimidate them. UPS is notorious for super exploitation of its workforce. It was one of the first US companies—more than three decades ago—to begin the large-scale use of part-time workers with substandard wages and benefits and few if any rights.

Workers angrily denounced these conditions in discussions with a WSWs reporting team, which visited the Maspeth facility. John stopped briefly on his way to his part-time job, sorting and loading UPS trailer trucks. “I start around 4 p.m. and work as long as they need me,” he said, “There is no overtime pay. I am lucky to get 40 hours. It depends on the workload.”

He described the strike and its aftermath. “It was only the drivers who walked out. A lot of them did not think he

[Reyes] should be fired. One guy went around talking a lot and then they walked. Two hundred and fifty fired! Insane! I didn’t think they would go through with it. These were lots of good people with families to feed. Everybody is talking about it and wondering who is next.”

A building maintenance worker belonging to the International Association of Machinists asked to remain anonymous when he spoke to the WSWs, fearing for his job. “No name. It is like a dictatorship in there. There are security cameras all over. A guard will come outside here to see what you want.” Soon afterwards, in fact, a security guard did appear.

“I worked here more than 25 years. Drivers get harassed more than maintenance. There is a GPS in the electronic board you sign when you receive a package. They watch where they are, how long at each place.

“It was unfair about the driver that got fired. That started the protest. Another guy had been fired after he was injured while working, hit by a car. He became unconscious. When he returned to work he could not deliver the same number of packages per hour as before. Some drivers spoke at the rally in the parking lot about the conditions for the drivers. Then they went back in after 90 minutes.

“It was quiet for a couple of days. Then they were told they would all be fired after they trained their replacements. On Friday, they told 40 to 50 guys to turn in their uniforms. They were fired then.”

In response to the workers’ spontaneous action in defense of Reyes, Teamsters Local 804 immediately sought to suppress the walkout. A video of the action shows a union bureaucrat relaying an order from the Local 804 president, Tim Sylvester, to go back to work while the union negotiates with the company. It is clear from the video that the workers are reluctant to comply, well aware that the bogus “grievance” procedure would neither protect their jobs nor their rights.

UPS would never have attempted such a provocation if it had not been assured that the Teamsters would do nothing. For decades, the union has sanctioned the exploitation of

part-timers and other workers. Former International president (and former Local 804 president) Ron Carey sold out the 1997 strike before being forced to resign for a kickback scheme orchestrated between the AFL-CIO and the Democratic Party.

Last year, the Teamsters signed a new contract that imposed higher out-of-pocket health care expenses on current and retired workers, raised wages well below the rate of inflation and gave a green light to the company to use GPS technology to discipline and fire drivers.

Opposed to any struggle that would undermine its relations with the company, Local 804, which represents 6,000 New York area UPS workers, issued a toothless statement, saying, “UPS’s actions this week were a heartless attack on drivers and their families.” The union launched a petition drive and appealed to Democratic Party politicians to revoke the city’s contract with UPS, reportedly worth \$43 million, in order to pressure the company to rehire the workers. In an utterly cynical response, UPS threatened that if the city terminated the contract and the company lost business it would lay off more workers, “potentially impacting the livelihoods of the many local UPS employees that did not join in the illegal work stoppage.”

The city’s “Public Advocate,” Letitia James, issued an equally worthless statement that the company “receives millions of dollars every year in reduced fine and fees for parking tickets” from the city, presumably aimed at pressuring UPS. “They should not treat workers in this manner,” she said.

These are empty words. The UPS workers would do well to remember the treatment the city meted out to school bus workers whose month-long strike early last year was abruptly ended and sold out by the Amalgamated Transit Union. The ATU shut down the walkout based on a statement by the candidates running for the Democratic mayoral nomination, including de Blasio, promising to “revisit” former mayor Michael Bloomberg’s termination of the Employment Protection Policy” (EPP), which had for decades protected the bus workers’ wages, benefits and seniority regardless of which private company won contracts from the city.

More than three months into the de Blasio administration, aside from a city council committee hearing that yielded no specific results, and a vague, non-committal statement from the mayor, there has been no action to reverse the attack on the school bus workers. Thousands have lost their jobs, and thousands more have suffered severe reductions in pay and benefits. Meanwhile, the union, the ATU, has abandoned its members.

The outrageous victimization of the UPS drivers can and must be fought. The possibility for such a fight is expressed

in the 100,000 signatures obtained within two weeks on a petition against the firings.

To transform this from potential into active support, however, UPS workers must take the struggle into their own hands by organizing rank-and-file committees, independent of the Teamsters and other unions, to appeal—not to big business politicians with worthless promises—but to the working class of the city. Hundreds of thousands of teachers, transit workers and other municipal workers are working without contracts and have suffered a devastating decline in living standards, while the stock market and bonuses to Wall Street executives have reached record levels. Rank-and-file workers must call for joint mass demonstrations and strike action to demand the rehiring of all the victimized workers and the full restitution of lost wages and benefits.

All of those—including pseudo-left organizations like Labor Notes and the International Socialist Organization—who claim that the Democratic Party can be pressured to defend workers are lying. Mayor de Blasio, Governor Andrew Cuomo and President Obama, no less than the Republicans, are tools of the corporate and financial elite. That is why the fight to mobilize the industrial strength of the working class to demand the rehiring of the UPS workers must be combined with the fight to build a mass political movement of the working class—in opposition to both big business parties—to end the economic and political dictatorship of the rich. Giant monopolies like UPS must be put under the democratic control of working people as part of a socialist transformation of society.

To take up this fight, we urge UPS workers and all those who oppose these victimizations to contact the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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