Teamsters officials agree to pay UPS and accept ten-day suspensions to end revolt against firings

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14 April 2014

On April 9, Teamsters Local 804 announced that it had reached an agreement with United Parcel Service (UPS) to reinstate all of the 250 workers who were being fired from the company's Maspeth, Queens, New York facility. The workers had staged a 90-minute protest walkout in response to the summary firing of another worker, Jairo Reyes, supposedly over a scheduling dispute (see UPS fires 250 workers in Queens, New York over drivers' walkout).

While full details of the agreement are not available, the main points include a 10-day suspension for all the fired workers and the payment of an undisclosed amount of "monetary damages" to the company by the union.

In exchange for taking the 250 workers back, the company has not only extracted the suspensions and payments from the union, but also a statement by the union that the walkout was "illegal and unauthorized," according to UPS. The company spokesman further stated that, "The settlement includes the following actions: IBT Local 804 agrees to compensate UPS for damages associated with the loss of productive employee time, other company costs and the negative impact on goodwill relating to the February 26 unauthorized walkout and related actions."

This agreement is being presented by the union as a victory. This is a farce and an insult to every UPS worker. Rather it represents a filthy betrayal of the workers, and an intensification of the collaboration between the Teamsters and the company, with the union providing labor management services for UPS.

The firing of Reyes and then of the other 250 workers who struck in his support is part of the company's decades-long campaign of speedup and harassment of the work force. The workers walked out to support Reyes because of the tremendous anger that has built up over this treatment. This agreement not only does not address these grievances, it strengthens the company's hand in escalating its attacks.

In its announcement of the agreement, entitled "Fired No Longer!," Local 804 claims that it will work with UPS to "improve labor-management relations at the company and to handle disciplinary disputes more expeditiously under the new grievance procedure." No details of this new procedure are yet available. However, the longstanding use of the grievance mechanism to either bury worker complaints or use it as a method of punishment will not change, regardless of any formal revisions in wording.

It must be remembered that it was not the union bureaucracy, but rather the rank-and-file workers, who acted to defend Jairo Reyes against his arbitrary firing by the company. As soon as the Local 804 bureaucrats heard about the walkout they sent an operative to shut it down. It is clear that the workers put the leadership on the spot and the latter immediately went into action to "manage" the situation.

According to a union statement, "Under the agreement reached yesterday with UPS, Local 804 acknowledges that the union's internal procedures for authorizing a strike were not properly followed on Feb. 26 and we have agreed to communicate the proper procedure to all union members."

It was clear from the beginning of the walkout that the union's primary aim was to get the workers back on the job and not upset its established relationship with UPS. In the end, the Teamsters in essence backed the company's actions by agreeing to a 10-day loss of pay

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for the workers and the payment of what amounts to a ransom to the company, which will come out of the members' dues. UPS, on the other hand, has reaffirmed its ability to use draconian measures in managing its workforce.

Every UPS worker must ask himself or herself—what will happen the next time the company takes arbitrary action against workers on trumped up charges? The so-called victory is in fact a warning by the company and the union against any other "unauthorized" actions.

In reaching the settlement the union was, above all, seeking to head off the possibility of a massive revolt by UPS workers across the country against their treatment by the company, as signaled by the more than 100,000 signatures on a petition against the mass firing. The Teamsters bureaucracy was quite aware of the potential for the situation to get out of its control. Local 804 president Tim Sylvester stated, "The buildup of frustration causes people to do things they wouldn't normally do. You can only put a teakettle on a flame for so long before the lid comes off."

The union was assisted by the administration of New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio and, in particular, Public Advocate Letitia James, along with a number of other Democratic politicians.

In a highly unusual move, James inserted herself into negotiations between the company and union with empty threats of terminating UPS's multi-million dollar service contract with the city. The purpose of James's warning was primarily to burnish her own reputation, as well as that of de Blasio, as "friends of labor." The outcome, however, will now be used as a precedent for collaboration between the unions and the de Blasio administration during negotiations that will take place over the coming months for long-overdue contracts covering hundreds of thousands of city workers.

The true nature of the de Blasio administration's approach is seen in its callous indifference to the fate of school bus workers, who have suffered thousands of layoffs and wage and benefit cuts after former mayor Bloomberg's revocation of the Employment Protection Policy (EPP), which de Blasio had promised to "revisit."

The agreement with UPS is also being hailed by various pseudo-left groups such as Labor Notes, who peddle the claim that the company has "backed down" under pressure. The company's policies of speedup and harassment remain intact, however, and it is quite possible that the Maspeth strikers will be victimized again in the future, once the publicity has subsided. The agreement must be seen for what it is: a stab in the back not only to the workers at the Maspeth facility, but to all workers, as they face increasing attacks from public and private employers.

The idea that pressure on Democrats and union officials is effective in defending workers is a dangerous trap. The UPS workers and all New York City workers can place no faith in either. In the fight against speedup and other forms of harassment, as well as the fight for new contracts covering municipal workers, it will be necessary to build rank-and-file committees, independent of both the unions and the Democrats, to unite all workers in a common struggle based on a socialist program.

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