

“If they could, they would hire us for \$1 an hour”

UPS workers vote to authorize strike as anger grows over company concession demands

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Workers at US package delivery company United Parcel Service (UPS) have voted overwhelmingly to grant strike authorization when their contract expires August 1. The Teamsters union reported a 93 percent vote in favor of a strike if a contract settlement is not reached in current negotiations, which cover some 230,000 workers in the US.

While the vote expresses the determination of workers to fight, the Teamsters will do everything in its power to suppress and betray a genuine struggle against the package delivery giant. As in the recent case of contracts covering 50,000 hotel and casino workers in Las Vegas, the unions routinely ignore contract deadlines and strike authorization votes to impose sellout contracts.

The vote by UPS drivers follows statewide walkouts by teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and Kentucky in opposition to low pay and cuts to education. Meanwhile, some 200,000 postal workers, members of the American Postal Workers Union, face a September 20 contract expiration deadline.

In the current negotiations, the Teamsters, headed by James Hoffa, son of former president Jimmy Hoffa, have operated in secret, attempting to impose huge concessions. A leak from the negotiating committee revealed that the union has proposed the creation of a “hybrid driver” position that would start at just \$15 an hour and work regularly scheduled shifts on the weekend, avoiding overtime rates and weekend premium pay. The workers would split their time between delivering packages and working inside a hub.

The company has also advanced a proposal for a mandatory six-day, 70-hour workweek during busy periods or whenever the company deems it necessary.

The moves are a response to competition from online retailer Amazon, which currently offers regular Sunday delivery of packages through the US Postal Service. According to its website, Amazon is also hiring drivers on a per trip basis as independent contractors, like ride share service Uber, thus avoiding having to pay employment taxes and benefits.

UPS is massively profitable, making \$4.9 billion last year and shelling out \$13.7 million in compensation to CEO David Abney. However, it is under pressure from Amazon, whose brutal regime sets the standard for efficiency in squeezing profits out of workers. Further, Amazon is planning to introduce later this year a package delivery service that would directly compete with UPS and rival FedEx.

UPS employs a workforce that is 70 percent part-time, with some workers starting at just \$10 an hour. Work is grueling, with injuries common and an astronomical turnover rate.

As for the Teamsters, it has accommodated UPS demands for a “flexible,” highly exploited workforce, sanctioning multiple pay tiers and substandard pay and benefits for workers classified as part-time.

The Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), a faction of the Teamster’s bureaucracy, called for “yes” on the strike authorization vote and has made critical noises about the conduct of contract negotiations. TDU members on the negotiating committee were expelled by Hoffa for leaking information to the membership about “hybrid drivers.”

While opposing the “hybrid driver” position, the TDU has endorsed the Teamster wage demands, which include a derisory \$15-\$16 an hour starting rate for part-time skilled positions. That rate is no more than the

minimum wage in some cities and would leave workers well below the poverty level in high-cost cities such as New York and Seattle.

As one worker wrote on the UPS contract vote Facebook page, “If the starting wage is over \$18 for full timers, why isn't the same for part timers? We all work the same no matter how long we stay.”

A veteran UPS driver from New York told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I voted ‘yes’ to strike. A strike would be hard on me, I have two kids in college, but we have to do what we have to do.

“They gave their CEO a bonus, but they are just giving us crumbs. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. If they could, they would hire us for \$1 an hour.”

He spoke about the exploitation of part-time workers. “UPS is getting away with murder. It is a shame for them to work so hard and get no benefits. Now, they don't want to pay them overtime,” he added referring to the proposal for “hybrid drivers.”

He continued, “We are all in one shoe no matter where we work—UPS, Fedex, DHL or Airborne Express,” stressing the need for the unity of all transport and delivery workers.

In 1997, the TDU endorsed the sellout contract negotiated by then Teamster President Ron Carey who, in the midst of a powerful strike, accepted a sub-par wage increases and then sent workers back without a vote. Carey turned out to be no less corrupt than previous Teamster leaders. Following the strike, he faced federal indictment for routing some \$1 million in Teamster funds into his own re-election campaign.

The notorious corruption of the Teamsters is not an aberration but is one expression of the degeneration of the all the pro-capitalist and nationalist trade unions, in the US and internationally. These are not workers' organizations but labor contractors, which promise to police a highly exploited workforce in exchange for the ability to collect union dues.

The attempt to “reform” the Teamsters is a dead end. Workers should carefully examine the experience this year of US teachers, who went outside the unions to organize a series of strikes. The response of the unions was to isolate the strikes, betray them and shut them down without achieving any of the teachers' demands. The unions claimed that teachers could win their demands by voting for the big business politicians of

the Democratic Party, not by mobilizing their own independent strength.

The role of organizations like TDU and is to keep the growing anger and militancy of workers within the framework of the unions and the Democratic Party. This is a recipe for betrayal and disaster.

UPS workers should take the initiative by electing rank-and-file workplace committees independent of the Teamsters to take over the conduct of their struggle. These committees should press the fight for the elimination of part time work and multiple tiers, a substantial wage increase, full paid health care and full cost of living increases.

For the success of their struggle, UPS workers must appeal to the broadest sections of the working class, including teachers, autoworkers, workers at FedEx and Amazon, and postal workers as part of a working class counteroffensive against the corporate onslaught on living standards and jobs. In this fight, American workers have powerful allies in workers across the world, who face similar attacks.

The fight by UPS workers raises the question, in whose interest is society organized? Workers need a socialist strategy based on the understanding of the irreconcilable conflict between the corporate owners and the working class. The subordination of all aspects of social and economic life to the profit demands of big business is in direct opposition to the needs of workers for health care, education, decent wages and a secure retirement.

There is no progressive answer to the continual lowering of living standards outside of the transformation of industry, communications and transportation monopolies into publicly owned utilities under the democratic control of the working class.



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