“If you don’t like it, they say, 'hit the road'”

UPS loaders describe working conditions and union-management collusion

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Earlier this week, United Parcel Service workers voted by 93 percent to authorize the Teamsters union to call a strike when the five-year labor agreement covering more than 230,000 drivers, warehouse and other workers at UPS hubs and air cargo operations across the US expires on July 31. UPS Freight workers, including over-the-road and city truck drivers and associated workers, voted by 91 percent to strike.

The overwhelming strike vote is part of the growing militancy of workers in the US and internationally. Since the beginning of the year, hundreds of thousands of teachers and other workers in the US have joined strikes and mass protests that have placed workers in increasingly direct conflict with the corporatist unions.

With nearly a quarter-of-a-million unionized workers, UPS is the largest unionized private sector employer in the US. The Atlanta-based company is also synonymous with speed up, workplace injuries and low-paid part-time labor, with workers often saying UPS stands for Under Paid Slaves. In the mid-1970s, UPS blazed the trail for corporations throughout America and the world with the introduction of a part-time casual workforce.

The Teamsters union has a long record of collaborating with the package delivery giant in beating back the resistance of UPS workers. In 1976, the Teamsters betrayed a two-week strike by workers in the midwestern Central states and a thirteen-week walkout on the East Coast against company demands to replace full-time “inside employees,” who sort packages and load and unload trucks, with part-time casual workers. In 1982, the Teamsters agreed to reduce the wages of new part-time workers—previously paid the same as full-timers but with no benefits—by a third or more.

Today, two-thirds of UPS workers are part-time.

In the last contract in 2013, union president James P. Hoffa and other union negotiators agreed to a contract that cut health benefits, lengthened the so-called progression period to reach top pay to four years, and froze starting pay for part-timers at $10 an hour. After a year-and-a-half of failing to get workers in several areas to accept local supplements necessary for the ratification of the National UPS Master Contract, Hoffa unilaterally implemented the national contract and supplemental agreements.

Last year, profits for the global logistics giant surged to $4.9 billion, bolstered by Trump’s corporate tax cuts. Profits are expected to hit $6 billion in 2018. Nevertheless, the company is under increasing pressure from Amazon to slash costs in the upcoming contract.

In response, the Teamsters lead negotiator in the current talks, Denis Taylor, has proposed the introduction of so-called “hybrid drivers” to allow UPS to work a new tier of lower-paid drivers on Sunday instead of paying senior workers double time. The drivers would deliver packages part-time and could be used for any other “recognized part-time work.”

All factions of the union bureaucracy, including the Teamsters for a Democratic Union and the Teamsters United Slate, are complicit in the decades-long erosion of the working conditions and living standards of UPS workers. In this contract, the TDU and TU are calling for a $15 an hour starting wage for part-timers, or about half of what a UPS part-time worker made in 1978 when taking inflation into account.

The coming struggle will require workers to elect rank-and-file committees, independent of the union, to unify all UPS workers and outline their own demands. These should include the transformation of all part-timers into full-time workers with full pay and benefits and workers’ control over line speeds, safety conditions and production. These committees should reach out now to Amazon, FedEx, USPS and other logistics workers, to prepare a common fight.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will do everything to assist UPS workers in the fight for rank-and-file committees and to provide a political perspective to mobilize the working class against the capitalist system and both corporate-controlled political parties. As part of this effort, the WSWS is interviewing UPS workers around the country on their conditions, the role of the union and the battle they are facing this year.

WSWS reporters recently sat down with two part-time loaders at the Tualatin, Oregon UPS hub, which is located in a southwest suburb of the Portland metropolitan area. To protect their identities from management and the union, the workers use the pseudonyms Peter and Heather.

Peter: I think the union will try to force everyone or trick everyone into voting ‘yes’ for the contract. A strike is going to be authorized, and the union will pretend they're going to the table with strong demands backed by the workers. But the union will cave and give the company what it wants because that is what it typically does. They have slowly eroded everything we have over

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the last three decades. My mom has been there for 20 years, and she hates it just as much as I do.

If it gets to the point that we are striking, and the company stays strong, they could say we don't need you and we are not rehiring you. They could pick scabs and hire other young part-time workers who don't know better, who will come in there for $15 an hour and deal with the horrific conditions. There are so many people who would be willing to come in for $15 an hour.

Heather: There is a danger of that. We have the union, which in a lot of ways sabotages us and works to give in to the company demands most of the time. But UPS workers compared to Amazon are in a much better place. So that could be something the company is striving toward, to get rid of the union, because they see that Amazon is doing the same thing without a union and is making ridiculous profits.

WSWS: That is a possibility. But the Teamsters are doing everything to help the company impose an Amazon model on UPS in exchange for retaining the union's jurisdiction and dues income. The proposal for a hybrid driver would dramatically drive down wages for the drivers.

Peter: There is a lot of truth to that. The union does not care as long as the company continues to get profits. They are only concerned about collecting our union dues. They take two-and-a-half hours [a month] from you. It ends up being $46 or more from every single worker. The union officials are getting their big salaries for doing nothing.

Heather: And we're getting $17,000 a year.

Peter: Everyday single day we're put in unsafe conditions. I'm not being dramatic.

Heather: After a year, my wrists started to hurt really badly, and stabbing pains got so extreme it took my breath away. They took me to the office and grilled me in a high-pressure type of situation in an accusatory language because they have to find something to blame on you to reduce their liability. But it was a repetitive motion injury. The UPS doctor wrote that I should have light duty. The supervisor changed it to avoid having any documentation showing temporary altered work.

Peter: One guy had a hernia from constantly picking up 70-pound bags and dumping them. UPS pressured him to not report it as a work injury. Then they said he had a personal injury and they were not liable. Eventually he had to quit. The most common injuries don't get reported, because workers don't realize it's a workplace injury. You start to have arthritis and you just deal with it as an everyday ache and pain. Carpel tunnel and anything like that are still injuries from the work you do.

Heather: Nobody from the union has ever talked to me. I thought the union president was just some other manager strolling through the workplace in the middle of the day with coffee.

Peter: No one trusts or respects the union. When you complain about the workflow being too heavy or the fact that there are packages falling on you, the union's response is: if it's too much you can shut the belt off. Management will then come and harass you and they will actually physically turn it back on if they don't deem it bad enough.

At peak season, new hires hired in as part-timers. The day after Thanksgiving, they are told to be in at 11 p.m. until they say you can leave. And overnight, your hours can change. If you don't like it, hit the road. You don't have a choice.

Heather: It's difficult to do our job in just five hours. The amount you are working, it can wear you out so quickly. When it's at its peak, it's so much worse. You can get there at ten or eleven at night, and you are getting off at ten or eleven in the morning. All you can do is drive home, get as many calories as you can possibly get into your body and then sleep, that's it.

The new hires don't have any rights or protection. They can be fired just as easy as they were hired.

Peter: As for the driver hours, a loophole that UPS has always had, one thing that they started doing during Christmas time, they will just pay the ODOT [Oregon Department of Transportation] fine for breaking the law forbidding drivers working over 11 hours in a day. For the month of December, just have the driver break the law against driving over 11 hours in a day. The law doesn't protect the worker.

Heather: Their profits will more than make up for it.

Peter: I would say we move tens of thousands of pounds per day, walking about seven miles. We had one driver literally work himself to exhaustion this past week. He was delivering packages, and he collapsed in the lobby of a business he was delivering to. They have trackers in your car to monitor how long you are at a stop. If you take too long at one stop, you are going to be harassed by your boss that day.

I started at ten dollars an hour, and over six years I worked my way up to $15 and five cents. In January, they made the announcement that the minimum wage for the company would now be $15. If you already get over that, you get nothing more. This increase came from UPS itself, because our turnover rate was so high, about 90 percent. New hires leave after two weeks because the conditions are so terrible.

Heather: When I was hired, there was a girl who dropped out in the first week, she couldn't handle it, just left, crying.

Peter: For most people, the rule is don't cry until you get to your car. But, it's abnormal if someone doesn't cry on their shift. And that is regular.

Heather: Honestly, we are concerned that the level of stress will lead to someone shooting at us. It's only a matter of time that it happens at our warehouse. I kind of expect it any day.

Peter: We had a conversation last Christmas on suicides, I am 100 percent surprised no one I know has killed themselves, it is so soul-crushing.

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