

The way forward for UPS workers

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The agreement “in principle” between the Teamsters union and United Parcel Service (UPS) is the most significant attack on workers’ living standards at the giant package delivery company since the introduction of part-time employment and the two-tier wage and benefit system in the mid-1970s.

The proposal for a new tier of lower-paid “hybrid” or “combination” drivers would mean the beginning of the end of decent-paying delivery positions and the transformation of the entire UPS workforce into low-paid and essentially disposable laborers. The insulting wage increase for part-timers, which caps out at \$15.50 by the end of the five-year contract, would leave hundreds of thousands of workers in poverty.

The fact that the Teamsters proposed hybrid drivers once again demonstrates that the “union,” far from uniting and defending the workers, is nothing but a tool of management.

The Teamsters will not respond to rank-and-file opposition by negotiating a better contract, as the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) claims. Instead the IBT executives will try to wear down workers through contract extensions and, if necessary, impose the new contract unilaterally, as occurred in 2014.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on UPS workers to take the conduct of this struggle into their own hands by electing rank-and-file committees, independent of and opposed to the Teamsters apparatus. These committees should launch a campaign now to defeat the sellout contract and to advance demands that meet the needs of all UPS workers.

These should include:

- 30 percent across-the-board pay increase and a restoration of cost of living adjustments
- Abolition of all tiers
- Transformation of all part timers to full timers
- Overtime pay for all work over eight hours and on weekends
- Full funding for workers’ pensions and healthcare plans

- Workers’ control over production, line and delivery speed

The Teamsters and UPS calculate that they can push through the contract by pitting older full-time drivers against lower-paid, younger warehouse workers, who would be hired in to the new hybrid driver positions. Rank-and-file committees must unite all workers in common struggle to improve the jobs, working conditions and living standards of all UPS workers.

Preparations should be made now to launch a strike when the contract expires and to mobilize all workers in mass picketing to enforce the walkout. At the same time, UPS workers cannot conduct this battle alone. Workers face an intransigent company, under pressure by Wall Street and Amazon to drastically lower labor costs, and backed to the hilt by the Trump administration and both corporate-controlled parties, the Democrats and Republicans.

These enemies are powerful, but the potential allies of UPS workers are far more powerful. Rank-and-file committees of UPS workers must fan out among Amazon, US Postal Service (USPS), FedEx and other sections of workers to mobilize the active support and cooperation of the broadest sections of the working class. There is enormous potential for such a united struggle because what is happening at UPS is the reality everywhere.

At USPS, where the contract for 200,000 members of the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) expires on September 20, the union has already agreed in previous contracts to the establishment of “postal support employees,” a second tier of lower-paid, temporary workers who routinely work six-day weeks and forced overtime. The Trump administration’s threats to reorganize and then privatize the postal service herald a further attack on jobs and wages. Amazon makes use of the latest in automation and robotics to squeeze as much profit as possible out of fulfillment center workers who make \$12 an hour, while Amazon’s billionaire CEO Jeff Bezos makes \$2 million an hour, or \$36,000 every minute.

These conditions are not limited to transportation and logistics. In the auto industry, the Obama administration, aided and abetted by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, used the 2009 bankruptcy restructuring of General Motors and Chrysler to slash the wages of all new hires in half. A third tier of temporary part-time (TPT) employees are forced to pay dues to the UAW but have no contractual rights.

The introduction of a second tier of part-timers at UPS after the Teamsters betrayal of the 1976 strike was part of a general counter-offensive by the ruling class against the working class, which included Reagan's firing of the air traffic controllers in 1981. Four decades later, social inequality has risen to the highest levels since the beginning of the 20th century, with three billionaires—Bezos, Warren Buffett and Bill Gates—now owning as much wealth as the bottom half of the American population. Labor's share of national income has fallen to its lowest level on record. While the corporations claim that there is no money for wages, pensions and healthcare, they have squandered \$4 trillion since the financial crisis on stock buybacks.

This process has been based on the suppression of the class struggle by the trade unions. Between 2008-17, the number of major work stoppages fell to the lowest level in more than a century.

The nationalist, pro-capitalist, pro-Democratic Party orientation of the trade unions has brought about their fundamental transformation. They are no longer workers' organizations, but labor syndicates, ruled by well-heeled executives whose incomes depend upon the enforcement of labor "peace." In the latest union scandal, top UAW negotiators have been indicted for accepting millions in bribes from Chrysler executives in exchange for signing company-friendly agreements. The unions see their role as preventing the spread of "labor unrest throughout this country," as one lawyer from the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) told the Supreme Court during the Janus case.

However, the period in which the companies, with the support of the trade unions, could force through attacks uncontested is coming to an end. 2018 has already seen a wave of teachers strikes throughout the United States, general strikes and mass protests in France and Germany, and mass demonstrations by workers in Iran. Truckers in Brazil have been on strike nationwide for the last month and a half. After decades in which the class struggle has been artificially suppressed by the unions, all signs are now pointing towards a growing conflict between the

working class, whose collective labor creates all the wealth, and the capitalists, who live off the wealth created by the workers.

Teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states organized strikes independently of the unions, and initially rebelled when the unions attempted to send them back to work. Tragically, however, teachers did not have independent rank-and-file organizations or the sufficient political understanding to prevent the unions from reasserting their control and selling out the struggles.

The key role in the betrayal of these strikes was played by "dissident" tendencies associated with the *Labor Notes* publication, which insisted that the teachers bow before the authority of the unions. A similar role being played at UPS by the TDU faction of the Teamsters union.

The record of all the union "reform" movements, from the TDU and Miners for Democracy to Steelworkers Fightback and the New Directions movement in the UAW, has been the same. At best, they have replaced one set of corrupt union bureaucrats with another. In the 1990s, the TDU championed the campaign of Ron Carey only to see him sell out the 1997 strike and resign after exposure of a kickback scheme involving the AFL-CIO and Democratic National Committee to raise money for Carey's reelection campaign.

The industrial counter-offensive by UPS and other workers must be combined with a new political strategy based on the political independence of the working class against both big business parties and the capitalist system they defend. The social interests of the working class are incompatible with a system in which all decisions are subordinated to the profit interests of a wealthy minority. The struggle for social equality means the struggle for socialism, which includes the transformation of the giant banks and corporations, including UPS, into public enterprises, collectively owned and democratically controlled by the working class. This must be part of a reorganization of economic and social life to meet the needs of society as a whole, not the profit interests of the corporate and financial aristocracy.

All UPS workers who are interested in fighting for such a perspective should contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today.



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