

“We should be governing ourselves in this fight”

UPS workers’ opposition grows to Teamsters sellout

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19 July 2018

Opposition of United Parcel Service (UPS) workers is continuing to grow to the proposed sellout agreement released by the Teamsters union last week.

The contract released by the union maintains poverty-level wages for part-time workers, who make up 70 percent of the nearly quarter million workers covered by the Teamsters-UPS contract and earn as little as \$10 per hour. The deal also creates a second tier of lower-paid “hybrid” driver/warehouse workers.

The same day the contract was released, the union announced it was extending the strike deadline beyond the expiration of the current agreement on July 31. The Teamsters executives are buying time to wear down widespread opposition from rank-and-file workers to the pro-company deal, which has been hailed by Wall Street for cutting costs and boosting margins.

Lilly, a warehouse worker in Rockford, Illinois, said when she heard that the union was extending the deadline, she thought, “Why the hell did they have us vote [to strike] if they weren't going to uphold it?” She added, “I firmly believe that the union heads are getting some sort of compensation from the corporations if they avoid strikes and strike a deal that favors the corporations.”

Lilly is 36 and is a part-time worker in the warehouse who sorts packages loaded onto a conveyer belt from trucks. She would like to move to a full-time position but said that “realistically, in our hub, that takes 20 years.”

While she makes \$10.35 an hour at UPS, she works 30 hours a week at a local school cafeteria, where she makes \$10 an hour. Her husband drives a tour bus for \$14 per hour. Together they are raising three children, an 18-year-old who just completed high school, a

13-year-old going into eighth grade, and a 10-year-old going into fifth. Were it not for the fact that her brother-in-law owns a two-family house where she lives, she said “we wouldn't make it.”

Lilly spoke about the transformation of the unions from organizations which had formerly sought, within certain limits, to defend workers’ conditions, into labor-management syndicates overseeing the destruction of workers’ wages and conditions. “I remember [my grandpa’s] pride in being a union member,” she said. “I remember unions sponsoring his work picnic and the reps being there to shake hands and find out any troubles you were having.”

Now, she said, “In my hub alone, if you ask a new employee who is a union steward or who is our union rep, most couldn't even tell you. The younger people have actually asked me what a union steward is.”

Today, she said, the word “union” is “just a name.” The unions, she said, have “gotten more about helping the corporations and not the worker. Why is [Teamsters President James] Hoffa making almost \$400,000 a year? He thinks his Teamsters can live on unsustainable income, so why doesn't he try it? Every single one of the union heads is making a six-figure salary and here we sit making a pittance.”

More than four dozen Teamsters officials make over \$200,000 per year in their officially reported salary, which excludes their corporate lunches, holiday stays and flights, and other sources of income. This is 20 times the annual pre-tax earnings of a part-time UPS warehouse worker laboring 20 hours a week for \$10 an hour.

This reporter asked Lilly what she thought about the WSWs *UPS Worker Newsletter’s* proposal for workers

to form rank-and-file factory committees. Such committees would take the struggle out of the hands of the pro-corporate unions and establish lines of communication with workers at Amazon, FedEx and the US Postal Service in order to prepare a common fight of logistics workers in the US and internationally against the giant firms.

“That would be brilliant,” Lilly replied. “If all these companies have the same contract, they can’t use them as a threat” to impose cuts. “It’s divide and conquer now. We are 250,000 strong. Yet we are being told it’s the ‘best they [the union] can do.’ The best we can do is look out for each other.”

“We should be governing ourselves in this fight,” she declared.

Lilly described conditions in the warehouse as “hard and physically demanding,” a job “made harder by improperly trained workers sending packages that are too heavy down the belt. On a belt a person might handle and load 400 packages. An average night for me is 800-1,100 packages. Most of the time we are alone in our trailer and may get help here and there. It’s a recipe for injury.”

Lilly was injured in April. A large, heavy box came down the chute and hit the boxes in front of it, pushing one into her and knocking her backwards off the loading stand. When she fell, she twisted her knee. To add insult to injury, Lilly had to endure being reprimanded by her supervisors for having been injured. The following night, Lilly had to provide her supervisor with a “list of ways I could prevent it from happening again.”

The workers are dealing with “a volume comparable to peak season every night for the last 3 months and injuries are happening weekly,” she said. This causes boxes to build up on the sorting aisle, blocking the exits to and from the workstations and causing a safety hazard for workers.

Lilly has other horror stories. Her co-worker told her a story from when she was training another worker. “They were waiting for packages to come down and the girl was holding onto the side of the extendo. My co-worker heard something heavy coming but before she could warn the girl it flew down the rollers and sliced two of the girl’s fingers off. While this poor woman was losing blood, they made her sit for almost 2 hours telling them what happened before they called an

ambulance.

“Now they want to pass a contract that will drive people away and leave us severely short staffed. Where is the [Teamsters] ‘brotherhood?’ People with 20 years are talking about leaving if this contract passes.”

Unsafe working conditions are the logical corollary of endless speedup demands by the company and the drive for profit. The more than \$7 billion pre-tax operating profit of UPS last year was built on devastating injuries for workers and heat strokes of drivers who cannot keep cool in trucks with no air conditioning and temperatures inside reaching over 120 degrees.



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