

“The union is essentially a puppet for the company”

What is life like for a permanent part-time UPS worker?

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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Sean, a 32-year-old part-time UPS warehouse worker of 12 years. Sean described the exploitative conditions for UPS workers at his Tennessee facility, the abuse and harassment of workers by management, and the complicity of the Teamsters union in facilitating continuous inroads into workers' conditions.

The four-year contract covering a quarter-million UPS workers expired on July 31. The Teamsters union announced an extension of the contract on July 10, the same day it released its proposed contract, which among other attacks maintains poverty-level wages for part-time workers and creates a second-tier position to replace full-time drivers.

Sean lives in a major city in Tennessee with his wife, who is pregnant, and their baby son. His salary is the family's sole source of income. Conditions are difficult. The family does not have a budget because “at this point we know my paychecks will never be enough,” Sean said. “I do what I can at UPS and see how much we are short, and then see what other work I can find.”

Sean began working at UPS when he was 19 years old. His stepfather was a bricklayer. He is proud of the fact that he has worked since he was 15 years old while in high school and has provided everything for himself through his own labor. His first jobs were as a cashier and food prep at Taco Bell, Food City and Wendy's fast food chains, and at a local carwash doing detailing and vacuuming. He started working at UPS on the midnight shift in his first year of college. He was sleeping two or three hours a day and missing classes regularly, so he had no choice but to leave school after his first semester.

Today, he works between 25 and 40 hours a week, picking up as many hours as he can. Because of his seniority, he now receives just over \$17 an hour. More than 70 percent of UPS workers are part-time, with many earning as little as \$10 or \$12 per hour. Like Sean, many of them work close to full-time hours. They want to be made full-time, but they have no opportunity to do so.

To make extra money, Sean has taken on numerous second jobs over the last decades. He has donated his own blood plasma for cash on several occasions. Two years ago, he drove deliveries for Papa John's Pizza. “I would work at UPS from midnight, sleep early morning for two or three hours, and start my shift from 5 p.m. They say it is \$15 an hour delivering food, but I never got that. Twice I had to go back and get money out of my car at the end of my shift to pay them, because of the cost of gas.”

Sean works as a “loader” in the UPS warehouse. Items come into the plant on feeder trucks and are placed on conveyor belts as quickly as possible by “unloaders.” These belts lead to sorting aisles, where “sorters” send items along seven different conveyor belts around the building, leading to between 10 and 12 trucks, which transport items to other locations in the facility. Sean's role is to place the sorted items onto trucks.

The conditions in the warehouse are grueling. “I think many people don't realize how much of a toll it takes on your body,” Sean said. A hierarchy of part-time and full-time supervisors watch over the line and heckle workers deemed to be moving too slowly. “More often they use finesse to try to get us mad at each other,” Sean said. “A part-time supervisor will come up and tell me how this or that guy is not keeping up and how difficult he is making it for me. It's divide-and-conquer.”

Particularly hated in the warehouse is the “clean-in, clean-out” policy. Workers are marched through metal detectors at the beginning and end of every shift and forced to place all their belongings in see-through plastic drawstring bags emblazoned with the UPS logo. “We are treated like thieves,” he said. “We're not allowed to bring our cellphones in. They have one cellphone for all the workers, and if one of our loved one's calls, they are supposedly going to find us within five minutes.”

Several years into his time at the plant, Sean was injured trying to load with a co-worker a 200-pound box that had

been mislabeled as 80 pounds. “I felt a pop in my wrist, and it ended up being several small tears along the tendon.”

The company provided Sean with a list of five “approved” doctors from whom he could choose for his examination. “They are basically company doctors and quacks and are complicit in what’s best for the company,” Sean said. “They know what the company guidelines are, and if they don’t stick to the guidelines, they won’t be on that list.”

The hub manager drove Sean to his appointment, waited outside during the examination, and came back into the room to discuss the prognosis. “The doctor of course said that it wasn’t serious, and that I just needed anti-inflammatories.” Sean remained in constant pain, working at the plant for five months with a brace and using only one arm. “Now I have permanent impairment and don’t have full range of motion. I can’t properly turn a doorknob.” He was eventually able to go to another doctor who advocated surgery and time off.

“Before the surgery, I met with the union officer and the hub manager,” he said. “They asked me to shift the day of my surgery to a Friday, so that I wouldn’t miss a work day. The manager would get a bonus for it. The union steward said to me: ‘You’re not a doctor.’ There was no type of defense of me, nothing about how my rights had been violated.”

Sean spent three months at home receiving workers’ compensation while recovering. He received 55 percent of a nominal salary calculated at 20 hours’ wages per week, even though he always works more than that. His weekly paycheck during these months was \$140.

“You don’t go into workers’ compensation and come out without debt,” Sean commented. He survived by taking on credit card debt and loans from pay-day centers charging extortionate interest rates of between 200 and 300 percent. “I didn’t have a choice.” Sean is now over \$10,000 in debt and says much of that will never be paid off.

Sean called the contract released by the union last month a “sellout” and said if it was accepted it would make conditions even worse for most workers. “The union is essentially a puppet for the company,” he said. “UPS have got their hand up the back of the union. The union takes advantage of the laborers and tries to keep us happy enough to not try to buck the system, so we don’t throw out the union and go out on strike and start our own organization that would truly represent us.”

Sean said he had read and supported the call by the WSWS UPS Worker Newsletter for workers to establish a rank-and-file committee of workers in every warehouse and depot, independently of and in opposition to the pro-corporate union. “It would bring a closer, more readily available organization,” he said. “In my mind, the people overseeing

the committees will be the people working in the warehouse. In the current union we have no oversight.”

Sean pointed to the grievance system as an example of how workers’ concerns are diverted and suppressed by the union and company. “We get a piece of paper. When we feel something is wrong we can write it down, and it may or may not get handled.” Sean filed a grievance about supervisors incorrectly registering workers’ work hours. He said that over December and January alone, he recouped \$500 in what would have been lost wages, had he not been keeping times himself.

When Sean filed a grievance for missed overtime pay, however, he was approached by a UPS supervisor and the union. “The company offers that you take less money as a settlement, or if you refuse, you might not get it at all.”

This was one of a number of issues that Sean thought a rank-and-file committee must address. “As soon as the company started doing wrong in the warehouse, we could put our hands in our pockets,” he said. “Our leadership would get together, and we don’t go back to work until it’s taken care of.”

“We would have to deal with safety. A lot of machinery is just unsafe. They respond to it by coming around and putting a red tag on everything and marking it as unsafe for use. A year and a half ago, a guy I work next to lost a finger on a piece of equipment that had been marked unsafe multiple times.”

“If we were to come together as workers and push the message, one unified message, that everything should be set up for the working class, by the working class, our society and our economy and everything would be lifted up out of the poverty that we’re in now,” Sean concluded. “The money would not just be going to the select few. Capitalism provides the big straw to a very few people, and a tiny straw for everyone else, instead of the big straw for the majority.”



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