

Notes from the campaign trail

Socialist Equality Party candidate campaigns among UPS workers in Michigan

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Niles Niemuth is the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for Congress in Michigan's 12th congressional district. Visit niles2018.com to donate and get involved in the campaign.

Yesterday I traveled with my campaign team to speak with warehouse workers coming off the night shift and drivers beginning their day at the UPS hub in Madison Heights, Michigan, just outside the 12th Congressional District.

The more than 250,000 UPS workers in the US whose contract expired at the end of July are facing a conspiracy of UPS management and the Teamsters union, who are seeking to impose a sellout contract that will further impoverish workers and severely erode working conditions.

The agreement, which was endorsed by a national conference of Teamsters executives last Thursday, creates a new tier of “hybrid” workers who will perform the functions of both drivers and warehouse employees while being paid \$6 per hour less than current drivers. This move is aimed at extending part-time work from the warehouses to deliveries and further lowering labor costs.

Warehouse workers, who make up 70 percent of UPS employees and are paid as little as \$10 per hour, would remain on poverty-level wages.

The warehouse workers I spoke with expressed deep anger over the conditions they endure every day, the abuses of management, and the collusion of the Teamsters union with the company. Their working conditions, like those of millions of workers around the world, increasingly resemble those of the indentured servants of old.

One 27-year-old worker, who asked to remain

anonymous, spoke to our campaign team as he was coming off the night shift. He was in a hurry because he was heading to his second job as a laborer, where he is paid slightly more than his \$10 wage at UPS. “It’s the only way to make ends meet,” he said. He noted that his wage was even less than many Amazon workers are paid.

“They pay everyone nothing here,” he noted. “I’ve been working as a picker, and I have to touch about 8,000 packages every day. Today I loaded somewhere between 25 to 30 trucks. They work us like mad. I’ve lost ten pounds since I started four weeks ago.”

The worker told us he thought the “union has their own agenda.” He said that he and all the other workers were forced to hand over dues money to the Teamsters every month, but that “their agenda is to give money to the rich.”

Workers expressed shock and outrage when we gave them our leaflet explaining that UPS last week announced a second quarter dividend payout to corporate stockholders of more than \$700 million.

We explained to workers in Madison Heights that this wealth had been extracted from the collective labor of hundreds of thousands of UPS workers all over the world to further inflate the bank accounts of the super-rich. The largest shareholders include the hedge funds Vanguard Group (which will receive \$46 million) and BlackRock (which will receive \$36 million).

Most workers were previously unaware of the dividend payouts. The Teamsters union has said nothing at all about it, because it exposes their lie that there is no money to provide workers with large wage increases. In fact, the almost \$3 billion that will be handed to shareholders by the company in 2018 would

be enough to give every UPS employee around the world a \$7,000 bonus. This is in addition to the more than \$7 billion in pre-tax profits reported by UPS last year, which would provide another \$16,000 to every UPS worker.

One 25-year-old warehouse worker, who earns \$11.75 an hour and works a second job as a server at a local restaurant, told me he thought the dividend payout was “being taken from my pocket. They’re making that much money, and they are giving us nothing and only allowing us to take eight-minute breaks.” He said the union was “taking even more money out of our checks,” which in his case amounted to only \$200 a week.

A female worker, who has four children and has worked at the warehouse for four years, told us she makes just \$13 an hour. She said the payouts to Wall Street showed it was a lie that there was no money for raising workers’ wages. “Of course there’s money, but they want their fancy steak dinners and to play golf,” she said. “We’re the workhorses, we line their pockets.”

She noted that the Teamsters claimed to represent workers but allowed no means for workers to express their views. At a recent Teamsters online meeting she attended, workers’ questions had to be submitted via a private line and vetted by union bureaucrats before being read out.

There was widespread interest in a socialist perspective among the workers I spoke to. I told workers that we believe that UPS’ dividend payouts are an example of the irrationality and destructive character of capitalism. Billions of workers around the world are forced to sell their labor power to survive and produce all society’s wealth, but that wealth is pocketed by the capitalist class that owns the factories, corporations and banks, and that controls the Democratic and Republican parties from top to bottom.

At Amazon, where working conditions are like those at UPS, CEO Jeff Bezos has become the planet’s richest man through the brutal exploitation of half a million Amazon workers around the world. This year alone he has increased his wealth by \$50 billion, or \$275 million every single day.

UPS workers who are seeking to fight for decent wages and working conditions cannot conduct a struggle through the Teamsters union, which functions

as a cheap labor contractor for the company. The trade unions in every country have been the central mechanism for lowering workers’ wages over the past 30 years by sabotaging and suppressing every strike.

Instead, workers need new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees elected in the warehouses, depots and hubs, to turn out to other workers at UPS, Amazon, the US Postal Service and elsewhere for a united fight.

My campaign for Michigan’s 12th Congressional district is aimed at mobilizing the working class in a struggle to replace capitalism with socialism. The giant logistics corporations, such as Amazon, UPS, USPS and FedEx, must be taken out of the hands of the capitalists and transformed into public utilities under the democratic control of workers.

The extraordinary modern technologies that under capitalism are used by the logistics companies to transform the workplace into a high-tech nightmare for workers, must be used to dramatically raise the living standards of the entire world’s population.

I urge UPS, Amazon, FedEx and other logistics workers to support my campaign for Congress, to get involved and to join the Socialist Equality Party, and to help build it as the revolutionary leadership of the working class.



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