"The whole world is watching us"

Teamsters local meeting erupts in anger as union official calls UPS workers' poverty wages "subjective"

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The WSWS UPS Workers Newsletter urges workers who want assistance in forming rank-and-file committees to contact us today.

Opposition is growing among UPS workers to the contract being pushed by the Teamsters union. A meeting of Teamsters Local 542 in southern California erupted in anger on Sunday, as UPS workers denounced the sellout contract.

The proposed agreement creates a new, lower-paid tier of "hybrid" driver and warehouse workers, aimed at cutting labor costs and extending part-time conditions to delivery. It maintains poverty wages for part-time warehouse workers, who make up the majority of the company's 250,000 workers.

Western Region Small Package Division Director Andy Marshall presented the concessions contract to a room of over 100 UPS workers. He speedily read long sections of the contract, insisting that any questions be "relevant" to the section he was reviewing. He repeatedly declared, "This was the best we could get."

Workers, frustrated by this insulting process, repeatedly interrupted Marshall. "This contract isn't good enough," one worker interjected. "We know how much we're worth. We know we are building a behemoth, and we should be compensated."

Hailing the supposed generosity of UPS management, Marshall claimed UPS would spend half its $6 billion in profits on wages and benefits under the proposed contract. In a "perfect world," workers would get it all, he declared, but "when I was a kid, I also wanted a pony." When workers raised concerns about workplace grievances, Marshall told them to file a complaint—to which the workers replied that they had, but it "went nowhere."

Marshall said references to "poverty wages for part-timers"—who make up 70 percent of UPS' workforce and are paid as little as $10 per hour—were "subjective." He added that claims that "the 9.5 system is broken are subjective too, because it's always gonna be broken." The 9.5 system supposedly protects workers from excessive overtime, but it actually does nothing to prevent UPS from forcing drivers to work up to 12- to 14-hour days.

Marshall declared contemptuously that the contract before workers was "the best in the whole country" and that "nowhere else offers this kind of benefits package." He defended the widely-hated tier system, declaring "that's the way it is," and "the company needs to compete on the market."

It is impossible to distinguish such statements, demanding that workers accept concessions to boost their employer's bottom line, from those of UPS executives. This is, in fact, the function of the Teamsters: as a labor management arm of UPS, it provides a supply of cheap labor by suppressing strikes and opposition of workers to the destruction of their conditions.

The Teamsters is consciously seeking to pit younger workers against older workers. When Marshall noted that health care costs for retirees would remain at $150 for individuals and $300 for their families, a discussion broke out among workers about putting money aside from each paycheck to cover retired workers' health care costs.

Marshall responded by claiming this was not possible, before demanding that workers decide if the contract was good for them on an individual basis. A worker yelled out in response: "You're telling us to vote for ourselves, but

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excuse me if I like to think of other people!”

Aware of the widespread sentiment for strike action, Marshall proceeded to issue a series of threats directed against workers considering striking.

“Ask yourself a question,” he declared. “Did you put money aside to be able to stay out? The last strike [in 1997] was 16 days… If we go on strike, you have to ask yourself how long you can afford to stay out there and what we’re going to accomplish out there.” This amounts to a declaration that the union will sabotage any strike and refuse to use the $160 million strike fund—paid for by workers’ dues.

Marshall then threatened that workers would lose health benefits for themselves and their families in the event of a strike. “You have to have one minute of time on the clock [each week] in order for UPS to make a [health care] contribution,” he said. “No one is going to be without health insurance unless this strike goes for a huge amount of time. The trouble is, you get into week number three and you have an emergency in your family, and you have to go back and pay all three weeks of COBRA [a supplemental insurance costing approximately $400/week].”

He declared that workers could vote in the electronic contract ballot “as many times as you want” and that only “the last vote counts.” The Teamsters is clearly counting on a protracted campaign to intimidate workers into accepting the contract up to the last minute. Marshall concluded by demanding that workers vote based on what is good for “you and your family.”

The *WSWS UPS Workers Newsletter* spoke to workers as they left the meeting.

Manny, a veteran driver, said that Teamsters officials told him he may be unable to vote because he is receiving workers’ compensation. “Now they are telling me I might not be able to vote,” he said. “Why am I any different if I got injured? I’ve been paying dues for years.”

“They’re trying to stop us from striking,” he said. “He [Marshall] is up there scaring people, telling them you need to have hours on the books for that week to qualify for insurance. That is part of making sure the strike doesn’t last longer than a week. That’s why he says you need to decide for you and your families, and not you need to decide for your brothers about what’s best for the contract.”

“Why not make them all full-time jobs, give everyone a raise and a full-time position and take away the 22.4s [hybrid roles]? I can’t believe he can get up there and talk like that in a union hall! We should be looking out for our brothers and sisters!”

Jonah, a young part-time worker who was in a group with Manny, added that older workers “who’ve been here for decades tell us how much better they used to have it, but we don’t know any better because we never had it to begin with. Management takes away benefits slowly, over generations.”

“You need to look at it long term, because they are simply going to take away a little and little each time,” he said. “It’s just like anything else such as your rights. They take away your rights, and that’s what your kids will have to deal with. They never will know what they lost, because they never had it to begin with.”

“The whole world is watching us,” Manny responded. “UPS sets the bar for other industries and what they can get away with.”

Jonah agreed: “UPS is the largest contract for Teamsters so whatever we agree on they’ll use that against other members in other industries, even places like McDonalds. As soon as we submit to something like that, that isn’t a fair contract, then everyone else is going to follow suit... This is a real big fight right here, and we need to lead by example.”

It is impossible for UPS workers to conduct a fight so long as leadership of the struggle remains in the hands of the pro-corporate organization of scabs known as the Teamsters. The *WSWS UPS Workers Newsletter* urges UPS workers to elect rank-and-file committees in the warehouses and hubs to take the struggle into their own hands. These committees should link up with UPS workers in other hubs, prepare demands as the basis for a nationwide strike, and link up with other logistics workers—Amazon, USPS, and FedEx, to organize a united fight.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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