

Teamsters for a Democratic Union to UPS workers: “Whatever you do, don’t fight!”

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18 October 2018

The Teamsters’ defiance of the “no” vote by United Parcel Service workers is another demonstration of the anti-working class character of the cheap-labor contractors that call themselves “trade unions.”

Workers voted on October 5 by 54 percent to reject the concessions contract backed by the Teamsters and UPS management. The Teamsters, however, has declared it ratified, dredging up a constitutional clause that gives it the power to ram through any contract if less than half the workers vote, unless a two-thirds majority votes against it.

In the two weeks since this blatantly undemocratic action, workers’ outrage has only grown. There have been widespread calls for strike action. Workers have announced they are withdrawing their union dues and will no longer pay for the privilege of being sold out and having their will quashed. In the warehouses, workers report they are being told nothing by the union and that management is threatening workers who protest.

If the Teamsters leadership of James Hoffa has been successful thus far in suppressing a rank-and-file rebellion against its despotic actions, it is thanks only to its loyal opposition, the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and Teamsters United (TU), as well as a collection of organizations backing them. The latter category includes *Labor Notes*, which is affiliated to TDU; *Socialist Worker*, the publication of the International Socialist Organization; and *Jacobin*, which is affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America.

On Tuesday, the TDU and *Labor Notes* held an online meeting for UPS workers. The speakers included *Labor Notes*’ co-director Alexandra Bradbury and staff member Beth Berslaw, TDU National Organizer Ken Paff, TDU Steering Committee member Nick Perry, and several low-level TDU officials.

If there was one message these speakers delivered to UPS workers, it was: “Whatever you do, do not fight back!”

In response to workers’ submitted questions, the speakers declared that workers must accept that there is no way to stop the imposition of the contract. This was because

nothing could be done that in any way challenges the authority of the Teamsters apparatus.

When a worker asked how they could develop support for a strike at hubs across the country, *Labor Notes*’ Beth Breslaw replied: “We don’t have the backing of the International union to mobilize that kind of action,” and “action on that scale is not something that’s feasible in the next two months.”

Another worker said he wanted to know if there “is anything we can do about the contract ratification right now,” and asked if workers “can leverage peak season” and “threaten a sick-in.”

Nick Perry, a member of the TDU Steering Committee, responded: “It’s pretty worthwhile to pressure International Vice Presidents.” If workers call them, “they’re not going to respond, but if they get 200 calls, maybe that’s something else. I don’t know how worthwhile it is, but that’s a good avenue to put pressure on them.”

A “sick-in,” he declared, “sounds good but would take a lot of organizing and membership participation, that wouldn’t be supported by the International.” We “couldn’t call a nation-wide sick-in,” he said, and “I don’t think it’s the right answer.”

What, then, does the TDU propose? That workers support TDU and TU candidates to win the leadership of the Teamsters who will, once in power, supposedly fight for workers’ interests. Yet when the TDU-backed official Ron Carey held the leadership of the Teamsters in 1997, he oversaw the sellout of a 16-day strike which resulted in the laying off of 15,000 workers and the introduction of a lower tier of “22.3” full-time employees.

They are also urging workers to sign petitions and write letters urging Hoffa to change his mind.

In the lead-up to the contract vote, *Labor Notes*, TDU and TU all claimed that a “no” vote would force the union leadership to “return to the table” and seek a “better deal,” as though the Teamsters leadership had, by some unfortunate misunderstanding, believed workers would want an agreement that creates a new tier of lower-paid “hybrid”

drivers and maintains poverty wages for hundreds of thousands of warehouse employees.

What actually took place was that the Teamsters threw out workers' votes and imposed the contract anyway. So why should workers appeal to these same forces, who have made clear they could not care less about what workers think?

While workers will gain absolutely nothing from this perspective, the TDU and *Labor Notes* functionaries have much to gain. As the WSWS noted in its recent article, "The multi-billion dollar business of American trade unions," the Teamsters controls assets of some \$270 million, and in 2015 alone spent \$190 million (of which less than \$1 million was spent on strike benefits). This is in addition to its control of multi-billion-dollar healthcare and pension funds.

The Teamsters' top-paid officials have incomes that place them in the top one or two percent of the population. These include Hoffa (\$387,244—top 1 percent), Secretary-Treasurer Richard Hall (\$281,845—top 2 percent), and the Teamsters United's own Sean O'Brien (\$302,442—top 2 percent). This is what motivates TDU and TU.

It is left to *Jacobin* to provide a "socialist" gloss to this program. Like *Labor Notes*, they speak on behalf of layers of the upper middle-class who look with envy at the incomes of the top union executives. They are the most fervent defenders of the trade unions because they are terrified of any movement of the working class.

The DSA, with which *Jacobin* is affiliated, is a faction of the Democratic Party, a party of the ruling class that the unions promote and fund.

Along with the ISO, *Jacobin* has promoted the TDU as a "rank-and-file" movement and has continued to support its call for workers to sign petitions to Hoffa following the override of workers' votes.

Jacobin's sole response to the Teamsters repudiation of UPS workers' vote, published six days later, on October 11, is a warning to the Teamsters leadership that its actions are so naked that they are undermining its ability to convince workers to support the organization.

Writer Joe Allen calls the Teamsters' actions "a gift to anti-union forces in the Janus era." This is a reference to this year's Supreme Court decision stopping unions from forcing public sector workers who opt out of union membership to pay so-called agency fees. In legal arguments, the attorney for the AFSCME union openly labelled such agency fees as the "tradeoff for no strikes" and warned that any weakening of the unions' stranglehold could "raise an untold specter of labor unrest throughout the country."

Allen continues: "If a boss wanted to make up a story to defeat a fledgling union drive—with indifferent union leaders who collect members' dues, negotiate a contract with a lower starting pay than non-union Amazon, and then

flagrantly ignore those workers' clearly and democratically stated objections to that contract—they couldn't come up with one as good as what's just played out between UPS and the Teamsters."

Jacobin is in the midst of a campaign to establish the Teamsters at non-unionized Amazon. The Teamsters are faced with the difficult position of convincing Amazon workers—who, as a result of the Teamsters' sellout contract, will be on a *higher* starting wage than their counterparts at UPS—to join and pay dues to the Teamsters.

An October 4 *Jacobin* article calls on its supporters to get jobs at Amazon with the aim of promoting the union. "Success in organizing workers at a corporate giant like Amazon will only come if organizers, strategically placed and coordinated, can agitate and motivate their coworkers from a position of comradeship in the workplace," it writes.

Jacobin tells workers they must join the Teamsters and support the TDU and TU. The TDU and TU tell workers that they must sign petitions to appeal to Hoffa. And Hoffa ... throws out workers' votes and orders them back to work. And through this conga line, all parties involved hope to keep workers shackled to this pro-corporate organization and prevent them from carrying out any genuine fight against the company.

The WSWS *UPS Workers Newsletter* has a very different perspective, one which is winning growing support from workers. From the outset of the struggle at UPS, the WSWS has urged workers to establish their own organizations of rank-and-file workplace committees, directly under their control and leadership, to reject the illegitimate contract, draw up their own demands for a strike, and mobilize support for a struggle.

Such committees would turn out to mobilize workers across UPS, Amazon, FedEx and other sections of the working class for a united struggle. We urge UPS workers who agree with this perspective to contact us today.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact