

Chicago Teamsters local announces end to UPS contract extension

George Marlowe
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The negotiating committee for Teamsters Local 705, which covers more than 8,500 United Parcel Services (UPS) workers in the Chicago metro area, announced Tuesday that it is rescinding a contract extension with UPS as of December 1. The contract expired last July, but the Teamsters had isolated the Chicago-area workers from workers across the country by keeping them on the job without an agreement.

David Bernt, a negotiating committee member, announced the rescission yesterday. “We made some progress at the table today, however there are many important issues still to be negotiated,” he said. “We will continue to meet with the company at a later date and bargain in good faith. If necessary, details regarding a strike authorization vote and other logistics will be announced if needed.”

The Teamsters Local 705 claims that it opposes any contract that incorporates a new “22.4” hybrid/warehouse driver position, which would pay up to \$6 an hour less than current drivers. The union also claims it wants a \$15 an hour starting wage for warehouse workers, a poverty-level wage that is already being paid to Amazon workers by billionaire oligarch Jeff Bezos, the world’s richest man. Bernt stated that if the union could not reach such an agreement, it would consider striking after the Thanksgiving holiday, the busiest period of the year.

The union is seeking to contain the widespread outrage among UPS workers, both in Chicago and across the country, over the Teamsters’ naked sellout at the beginning of last month.

On October 5, the union defied the 54 percent “no” vote by UPS workers nationally on its sellout contract, which creates the new “22.4” tier, starts warehouse workers at \$13 per hour and boosts corporate profits. The union is utilizing a loophole in its constitution,

stuck in 30 years ago, allowing it to impose any contract if less than half the workforce votes, unless more than a two-thirds majority votes against it.

The union ignored a 93 percent strike authorization vote by UPS small package workers and a 91 percent strike authorization vote by UPS Freight workers. UPS Freight workers are now being forced to vote again on the same contract they already rejected last month.

There is widespread determination among workers to fight. A young UPS worker at the Chicago Area Consolidated Hub (CACH), a massive warehouse with thousands of part-time workers, told us the unsafe conditions he witnesses daily.

“It’s a really dirty, filthy place,” he said. “Conditions are terrible. I’ve seen mice and bugs everywhere. In the summer, temperatures are terrible. We’re just sweating, dying doing heavy work. We work in this giant concrete box and the heat is also made worse by the machinery. In the winter, they had to be forced to turn the heat up because some pipes froze.”

The extremely poor air quality makes breathing difficult for some workers. “Some people will wear surgical masks,” the worker said. “It gets really dusty in there. You can see it on the walls. They don’t have an air filtration process either. They have giant dusty fans and they only clean them every six months. A whole area of dust and grime covers us.”

The worker said there have been multiple dangerous fires at CACH, including three this year. In March, a fireball explosion caused a two-hour evacuation. “UPS never commented on it or told us why it happened. The union didn’t say anything about any of this either.”

“It takes 10-15 years to become full-time,” he said. “You have to be full-time for a set amount of time to collect a full-time pension. I only make \$12 an hour now after three years, and UPS keeps making profits. If

the unions worked for us, we wouldn't be in this situation today. They keep trying to divide us all up. And UPS keeps pushing us and pushing us to a corner until we have no choice but to fight back and revolt."

The last thing that the Teamsters Local 705 apparatus wants is such a "revolt." Its central concern is to impose a contract that will be amenable to UPS without provoking such a rebellion by the workers. If the union reaches an agreement without the new "22.4" tier, or with a slightly higher warehouse starting wage, it will be in exchange for other cost-cutting concessions worked out in backroom deals with the company.

The Teamsters has still not taken a strike authorization vote because it has wanted to wait until the union had rammed through its sellout contract nationally. In the event that it does actually call a strike authorization vote, it will seek to prevent a strike, or confine any action to isolated stoppages aimed at imposing a defeat on the workers.

Since 1979, Teamsters Local 705 has claimed that the negotiation of a separate contract from the national agreement would provide Chicago workers with better conditions. In reality, every contract has closely mirrored the concessions and sellouts imposed across the country. In 2008, after Chicago-area UPS workers voted to authorize a strike, the union prevented a strike and imposed a concessions contract. The overwhelming majority of CACH workers now work for as little as \$10 per hour.

David Bernt, who is attempting to provide the Teamsters local with a "left" and militant image, is a member of Teamsters United and Teamsters for a Democratic Union, which are rival factions of the Teamsters apparatus. In the wake of the naked sellout by the union and the leadership of Jimmy Hoffa last month, the TDU and TU have been the most determined defenders of the union apparatus against the workers.

They have instructed workers to sign worthless petitions to the Hoffa leadership, and thus appeal to the very forces who just threw out workers' votes and made clear they could not care less what workers think. The TDU has told workers they cannot prepare strike action against the illegitimate contract because such action "does not have the backing of the International." (See: "Teamsters for a Democratic Union to UPS workers: 'Whatever you do, don't fight!'")

A serious fight against UPS requires that workers form new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file workplace committees, in every hub, independent of the Teamsters and democratically controlled by workers themselves.

Such committees could issue a powerful appeal to UPS workers across the country, as well as workers at FedEx, Amazon and other sections of the working class, for a united struggle, including a nationwide strike. The Chicago metro area is a strategic location for the logistics supply chains of major corporations, with more than 160,000 logistics workers.

We urge UPS workers who want to take forward such a fight to contact us today.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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