

“There’s been a blackout from the union”

Teamsters locals use anti-democratic loopholes and deceit to impose sellout agreements

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Months after the sellout of workers at United Parcel Service (UPS) by the Teamsters union, which imposed a pro-company contract against a majority “no” vote, local unions are continuing the anti-democratic processes to push through equally rotten supplemental agreements.

Workers in the upstate and western New York regions rejected their supplemental agreement twice due to the crisis-ridden state of the pension fund, lack of harassment protections and essentially no improvements for part-timers. Despite their opposition, workers are being forced to accept it.

In the second vote held on February 5, 65 percent of members opposed the agreement. However, on February 11, the national leadership led by James Hoffa, declared the agreement ratified, citing a clause in the constitution that requires a two-thirds vote to defeat a contract if fewer than half of eligible members vote. The turnout for the vote was 46 percent of the roughly 4,000 eligible workers in the region. While union officials blamed workers for not participating, the lower voter turnout expresses more the workers’ lack of confidence in the Teamsters than support for the deal.

The Teamsters used the same obscure clause to impose the national master agreement last year when workers around the country rejected it 54.7 percent to 46.3 percent despite a concerted campaign by the Teamsters leadership using misinformation and even threats. Covering 250,000 workers at UPS hubs and warehouses, the contract created a new tier of lower-paid “hybrid” drivers, maintaining poverty wages for part-time warehouse workers who make up 70 percent of the workforce, and gave a green light to management to continue speedup and harassment.

The same tactics are now being used to impose

supplemental agreements, which union locals negotiate separately and must be ratified before the national master contract can take effect, although management is already using changes in contract language to undercut logistics giant Amazon.

Supplemental agreements for central Pennsylvania, western Pennsylvania, Local 243 (based in metro Detroit), and Local 804 (based in Long Island City, New York) have not yet been finalized. In order to repeat the tactics used against UPS workers in upstate and western New York, local union bureaucrats are in closed-door negotiations with UPS, keeping workers in the dark about any details on their progress or not even providing a timeline for completion and ratification.

Such is the case in Local 804, which covers 7,000 workers in Long Island City, New York. Workers attended a general membership meeting on February 17 to learn about the status of negotiations on their supplemental agreement. The meeting was held at the Local 282 union hall in Lake Success, 17 miles away from Long Island City, to discourage a big turnout.

Attendees learned only that negotiations would resume in March in California. In conducting negotiations on the other side of the country the Teamsters leadership exposes its desire to maintain tight control over the process. This secrecy is intended to forestall rank-and-file opposition to the concessions that the Teamsters leadership is planning to impose upon members in violation of democratic principles.

“We don’t know what is happening with our supplemental,” one worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “There has been a blackout from the union.”

A worker with 13 years of experience at the Maspeth,

New York, facility said they were voting “no.” “We will not give [UPS] two things they want. We will not give Sundays and flexibility. They want Sundays without paying the overtime rate. That is what is holding [up] finishing the contract.”

During the Local 804 meeting none of workers’ grievances about the master contract were addressed. Speaking to the WSWs, several workers expressed opposition to the contract’s creation of “hybrid” workers, who work both in the warehouse and as delivery drivers with lower pay and protections. “Hybrid drivers are taking away overtime and pay from regular drivers,” said T’challa Mercer, a combo helper at a hub in Brooklyn, New York. “It is not fair for them or their families.”

“We must have no hybrid workers set up in the master contract imposed on us, because we must have full-time workers,” said a driver named Phil. He explained that the company “wants us older workers to be in competition for jobs and pay,” by pitting the younger workers against them.

The Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) faction, which has a large presence in Local 804 and other parts of New York, hopes to keep workers chained to the union, promoting the false hope that it can be reformed. Instead of mobilizing broad-based opposition of workers at UPS and UPS Freight against the anti-democratic imposition of the national and local agreements, the TDU’s proposal for a “fight” is to eliminate the two-thirds clause in the constitution and replace the Hoffa administration with new leaders in the 2021 elections.

Despite the mass opposition to the master contract, TDU never called for a strike. They focused instead on securing a “no” vote, claiming workers could force the union and UPS back to the bargaining table to secure a good contract. This campaign was a conscious attempt to throw dust in the eyes of workers, under conditions where the unions have demonstrated again and again that they work as agents of the bosses.

TDU has been advocating for reform of the Teamsters union since the mid-1970s, to no success. In 1991 TDU backed the election of Ron Carey as Teamsters president, despite the fact that Carey, as president of Local 804, had enabled UPS to replace full-time jobs with lower-paid part-time positions. Once in the top Teamsters post Carey proceeded to isolate strikes and endorse givebacks in contracts with various companies, culminating in the betrayal of the 1997 UPS strike.

Carey was forced from office after it was determined that he had used an illegal kickback scheme designed to

siphon money from the union treasury to fund his 1996 re-election campaign.

TDU supporters in the Teamsters leadership are engaged in betraying the membership and forcing through concessions no less than the union’s old guard around Hoffa. This flows from the fact that TDU shares the same pro-capitalist and nationalist perspective as the bureaucrats they claim to oppose. Like the old guard leadership their primary concern is to maintain their comfortable posts in the leadership, not the defense of workers, who they view with fear and hostility.

Workers can achieve nothing through attempts to reform the Teamsters. They can and they must embark on an independent road by forming their own democratic organizations, rank-and-file workplace committees that will wage a genuine fight against the corporations.

These rank-and-file committees should demand the elimination of tiers, the promotion of all part-time workers to full time, an end to company harassment, workers control over health and safety, along with secure and full pensions and full health care benefits. To assert these demands requires the development of a network of workplace and factory committees to unify workers across the company with their class brothers and sisters at Amazon, FedEx, US postal service and the whole warehouse-logistics industry internationally.

We urge all workers to share their stories and join the fight to build rank-and-file committees by emailing upsworkers@wsws.org and signing up for the UPS Workers Newsletter.



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