United Parcel Service forcing employees to work without protection amid COVID-19 pandemic

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As an increasing number of people throughout the United States fall under "shelter-in-place" orders to limit the spread of COVID-19, hundreds of thousands of workers at UPS are forced to remain on the job. With a global workforce of nearly 445,000 and revenues of over $20 billion in the fourth quarter of 2019 alone, the corporation is gearing up to make big profits in spite of the pandemic, while placing its workers in harm's way.

Earlier this month, as the coronavirus pandemic began its leap across the globe, UPS executives were gloating about the business opportunities. "Our planes are flying in and out of China right now … I think we're trying to position ourselves to take advantage of some pent-up demand [with the end of China's nationwide lockdown]," UPS Chief Financial Officer Brian Newman told Reuters on March 3.

In a statement last month, Mike Mangeot, UPS's public relations manager, declared: "UPS has put in place health and hygiene measures that are in line with suggested World Health Organization measures… These include providing masks and hand sanitizer for flight crews, as well as disinfecting the flight decks of our aircraft coming from Asia. We also have a substitution process for pilots who aren't comfortable operating China flights."

But his statement made no reference to the plight of UPS's hundreds of thousands of warehouse workers stationed across the planet whose lives may be impacted by the corporation's jockeying to meet "demand."

"There has been no serious talk about this disease" at UPS, a warehouse worker in Baltimore, Maryland, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "Cleanliness is pretty much laughable at my building, which is not a laughing matter at all. Just yesterday a supervisor was telling everybody that we had to wear gloves. But there's no special sanitization of any sort or any other safety measures as far as that [is concerned].

"We're pretty much just robots [to the company], if you get sick then you just get sick and don't show up for a couple of days," he said. The worker expressed worry about his site's sole "responder," a worker who handles broken packages and other hazards at the job. "Some of the stuff they have him do, knowing that he doesn't have any protective gear for this," he said. "I remember him getting sick handling something [on the job], and he's the only one we have."

"Any day, he could be loading car and he has to stop. They have him taking up multiple things. People have no clue what goes on in shipping... 300 odd packages in a car, sent to one place as a bulk stop with multiple packages. Then you have to pull that off, then someone calls in a responder and he has to stop. Then somebody else has to step in. It's a job in itself," he said.

A worker in California told the WSWS, "UPS insists that we are part of the 'essential industries' category that will not adhere to the state's [lockdown]." The worker explained that at a work meeting, "fellow employees brought up the need for gloves, face masks… in order to keep ourselves and our families safe."

"UPS management said 'no'… It's astonishing," they remarked.

UPS workers that become infected will be given ten days of leave from the company. But such policies are little help given that an infected person can go days without symptoms, potentially infecting an entire worksite in the meantime.

This is already taking place. "Terrified' Package

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Delivery Employees Are Going to Work Sick," reported a headline in the *New York Times* over the weekend.

A UPS package sorter from San Francisco told the *Times* that she has continued to work despite complaining that her "throat feels like broken glass." According to the newspaper, the worker "said she was petrified that she would lose her job if she called in sick. 'I can't afford to be homeless,' she said." Other workers stated they'd been denied sick days because managers couldn't afford to "go without them" for a day.

An NBC News report last week reported that, in at least nine different states, UPS has not implemented safety precautions for delivery drivers such as masks and gloves or "no-contact" deliveries. Drivers have not even been provided with sanitizer, with management instead advising drivers to wash their hands regularly—an impossibility on a delivery run, where every spare second is marked against drivers by management.

"I got 160 stops on here, 300 packages," a Massachusetts driver told NBC News. "If I'm sick and don't even know it, that's 300 opportunities for people to get it. I deliver to doctors' offices, urgent cares, primary care offices. The potential for bad things to happen is crazy."

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters is collaborating with UPS to keep workers on the job without sufficient protection. A COVID-19 page on the Teamsters website stresses workers' personal responsibility, rather than the company's responsibility, for limiting infections, including an "[e]mphasis on personal hygiene practices, hand-washing, respiratory etiquette, and social distancing." But the policy of "social distancing" is impossible to apply in a crowded warehouse full of personnel in constant interaction with one another and merchandise.

The Teamsters union, having collaborated for decades with UPS management to enforce one concession after another, is jointly responsible for the unsafe working conditions prevailing in UPS facilities. In 2018, the union overrode a majority "no" vote to force through another concessions contract which introduced a second tier delivery driver position.

For its part, the Teamsters for a Democratic Union, an opposition faction of the Teamsters bureaucracy, has sought to corral workers behind a petition to UPS management, pleading with them to give workers two weeks paid time off in case of exposure and to implement sanitation measures. The function of such a campaign is to channel workers behind fruitless appeals to management and the Teamsters apparatus and keep them from taking matters into their own hands, as autoworkers did last week when they walked off the job in defiance of the auto companies and UAW's attempts to keep them working during the pandemic.

"[In] my opinion I think it's very idiotic to have a number of sick days that you can use," the Baltimore UPS worker told the *World Socialist Web Site.* "I think it should depend on doctors notes and things like that or if you have a condition because you can never tell how long someone's going to be sick… or what their situation may be."

"Someone could just have pneumonia and just giving a person like that one sick day just isn't enough… Even five [days]. Who knows how long that will last, you know?"

Shut down all nonessential production to halt the spread of the coronavirus! Distribute our statement, "How to fight the COVID-19 pandemic: A program of action for the working class" and form rank-and-file committees at your workplace.

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