

Petition demanding pandemic hazard pay for UPS workers gains 300,000 signatures

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19 May 2020

Approximately 300,000 people have signed an online petition urging the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) to demand hazard pay for all United Parcel Service (UPS) workers during the coronavirus pandemic. While the Teamsters union has enforced the exploitation of workers during the pandemic, the broad support for the petition indicates the growing opposition of UPS workers to the conditions imposed upon them since the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States.

“All UPS employees are risking the chances of catching and spreading the COVID-19 virus,” the author of the petition, John James, writes. “UPS has not been supplying enough protection to their employees and have not taken further safety procedures to make sure their employees cut down the risk of catching or spreading COVID-19.”

The implementation of “hazard pay” would allow for a temporary increase to workers’ wages for the duration of the pandemic to compensate them for the increased risk of getting severely ill or dying from their job.

Both UPS management and the union leaders are concealing the real number of confirmed cases and deaths, including from the immediate coworkers who may have come into contact with an infected individual. Dozens of drivers and warehouse workers from across the country have reported cases in their workplace which they only discovered through social media or speaking to coworkers.

There are currently two reported deaths in the company, both employees at the massive UPS Worldport in Louisville, Kentucky. Workers reported on Facebook that at least two UPS workers have died in the Chicago area, although this has not been confirmed by the union or company.

Parallel situations exist in workplaces across the US and internationally, including logistics companies like Amazon and the US Postal Service. Although the companies cite privacy concerns to justify withholding this information, their true motives are to keep workers ignorant, hide the extent of the crisis, and prevent protests and walkouts.

The measures that UPS has taken to protect its workers have been belated and entirely inadequate. Although the first

case of the novel coronavirus in the United States was detected in January, UPS did not provide masks or personal protective equipment to its workers until April.

Once measures were put into place, management merely set up small cleaning stations, handed workers spray bottles filled with water and bleach, encouraged the use of hand sanitizers, and sometimes gave each worker an N95 mask that they were to reuse.

The cosmetic half-measures taken by the company to “protect workers” in reality do very little to reduce the rate of viral transmission.

Warehouse workers sort, load, and unload packages under the heavy pressure by the company to achieve the fastest rates possible. With the greater reliance of the population on delivery services under conditions of stay-at-home orders, the current package volume is close to the busiest months of the “peak season” between November and January.

Those who work inside the warehouses will inevitably have to come into proximity of other workers with little time to disinfect their stations or change their protective equipment under the pressure from above. Workers report that in many warehouses, management has done little to enforce “social distancing” between employees of at least 6 feet apart.

Furthermore, data suggests that the novel coronavirus remains infectious on metal surfaces for as many as five days. It may remain infectious for two to three days on plastics and for one day on cardboard. Without proper decontamination or protective equipment, UPS drivers and warehouse workers who come into contact with cardboard packages are thus at risk of exposure to the virus.

Even if rigorous cleaning and social distancing protocols were enforced, the fact remains that the only way to combat COVID-19 is through the implementation of mass testing and contact tracing. Such a system would discover anyone who has the virus, whether they show symptoms or not, and allow for the isolation of infected individuals from the rest of the population.

Rather than implement widespread testing, reduce

productivity rates, and guarantee workers their basic workplace protections, UPS executives are driven by the need to generate more profits that inevitably come at the expense of the workers.

The significant response to the petition demanding hazard pay reflects workers' willingness to fight against the criminal endangerment of workers by UPS, and to demand safer conditions and adequate compensation. This fighting spirit is to be encouraged.

However, the Teamsters union, to which the appeal is directed, does not fight for workers. Rather it has consistently sided with management against UPS workers. In the middle of the current unprecedented health and social crisis, the union has kept workers on the job and enforced the unsafe conditions in which workers are forced to operate.

Dylan, a UPS worker in the California Bay Area, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I haven't even heard anything from the union. I've left them two messages since this has all been going on, and I haven't heard back yet. It seems like they should be doing something for us, but I just don't see anyone."

James P. Hoffa, president of the Teamsters, is a member of a panel appointed by President Donald Trump to advise him on reopening the economy. Other members include billionaires Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon, and Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook. These panelists' concern is to send workers back to their jobs as quickly as possible, regardless of whether conditions are safe, so that they can resume the generation of profits.

The union's treachery was on full display during the negotiations for the 2018 UPS contract, which maintained low wages for warehouse workers, agreed to the company's terms for health and safety, and created a "hybrid" driver position. The hybrid position represented a step toward the abolition of full-time drivers and toward the extension of part-time, low-wage work from the warehouse to the delivery fleet.

When workers rejected this sellout contract by 54 percent, the Teamsters used an antidemocratic loophole in the union constitution to declare the contract ratified. During the same period, after UPS Freight workers rejected a separate concessionary contract, the Teamsters threatened workers with a lockout and the loss of medical benefits if they did not ratify the contract in a second vote. The union also threatened that if freight workers went on strike, it would isolate the strike by keeping UPS parcel workers on the job.

For decades, the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) faction has promoted the illusion that the Teamsters can be reformed. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the TDU has claimed that the way to fight for safer working conditions

and adequate protections is to appeal to the Hoffa bureaucracy. If this tactic fails, which the TDU openly admits is likely, the faction proposes an appeal to UPS management or to a governmental agency such as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OHSA).

As a "loyal opposition" faction of the Teamsters bureaucracy, the TDU aims to channel workers' outrage back into the union and prevent an independent mobilization of the working class to assert their own interests.

Rejecting the call for fruitless appeals to the union which has given the "green light" to UPS while workers risk their lives, UPS workers must form their own rank-and-file safety committees. Operated democratically by the workers themselves, these committees must fight for the urgent measures that must be implemented in every warehouse to protect workers and their loved ones.

Workers' safety committees will serve as the means for workers in consultation with trusted medical and scientific experts to oversee the expansion of testing, protective gear, and social distancing measures with the advice of medical professionals, along with control over pay increases and speeds on the line and delivery routes.

These committees must function democratically and independently of the unions and the capitalist political parties. The Republican and Democratic parties, to whom the Teamsters union has donated tens of millions of dollars, have facilitated the recent multitrillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street and disastrous health response to the pandemic.

Established at every hub, rank-and-file safety committees can facilitate communication among workers, monitor conditions in the workplace, formulate demands, and enforce them. They must also serve as the means to reach out and connect with other sections of the working class who face the same dangers, including workers at Amazon, USPS, FedEx, auto plants, food processing plants, grocery stores and hospitals.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* will help workers in every way possible to form rank-and-file committees. Workers need new organs of struggle, and rank-and-file committees will be the means by which they fight for their interests during and beyond the pandemic.



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