

Truck drivers at United Natural Foods vote to strike over lack of pandemic safety measures

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Drivers for United Natural Foods (UNFI) in the New York area have voted to strike over the company's failure to comply with New York, New Jersey and CDC COVID-19 safety guidelines. UNFI delivers groceries to a number of major retailers in New York City, New Jersey, upstate New York and Connecticut, including Whole Foods Market and Stop & Shop, from its distribution center in Montgomery, New York, about 60 miles northwest of New York City.

The drivers, members of Teamsters Local 445, report that the company has not provided masks and hand sanitizer and has not disinfected the trucks in months. Consequently, drivers have been forced to buy their own safety supplies. The contract covering these approximately 120 truck drivers, signed in 2017, expired on October 31. Strike action was authorized in a vote the next day.

In addition to the lack of COVID-19 safety measures, drivers are also angry over the company's plans to impose additional 10-hour workdays instead of hiring more drivers under conditions in which the pandemic has rendered the distribution of goods especially critical.

A federal mediator joined the negotiations on November 1. On Monday, the company announced that the union had agreed to a contract over the weekend. No details are yet available, and it is not clear whether the agreement has been ratified.

The company had threatened that, in case of a strike, "UNFI will immediately activate its robust contingency plans and mobilize proven third-party partners to keep the food supply chain operating for all our customers in the tri-state area." In other words, it will bring in scabs to break the strike.

UNFI is the largest publicly traded grocery distributor in the US. Founded in 1996, it has grown by gobbling

up a series of competitors. UNFI received \$17.6 million in local and state tax subsidies when it built its Montgomery distribution center.

UNFI, like Amazon, is reaping massive profits on the basis of forcing its workers to labor under unsafe conditions while the pandemic continues to spread. UNFI's net sales so far for 2020 is \$26.5 billion, a 19 percent increase from the previous year. This year its stock has nearly tripled in value from a low of \$5.43 on March 12 to \$15.96 on November 6.

A strike by UNFI workers would have the ability to mobilize significant support. Local 445 has more than 3,400 members, in fields such as construction, public employment, freight, health care, warehousing, and public and school transportation. Such a strike could also provide a catalyst for much wider action by workers in the logistics industry against unsafe conditions and exploitation.

However, the Teamsters union is directing all of its efforts towards ramming through an agreement as quickly as possible. While details of the new contract have not yet been made public, it is likely to include significant concessions. This follows a decades-long pattern of betrayals by the Teamsters, with the most recent notable example at UPS in 2018 when the union overrode a majority "no" vote to force through a sellout contract.

To break the Teamsters union-imposed isolation and connect their struggle to those of workers throughout the New York area and nationwide, delivery drivers must follow the example of autoworkers and teachers throughout the country form rank-and-file safety committees, to formulate their own demands and conduct their struggle independently of the union. Such committees would also be independent from the Democratic Party, which under Governor Andrew

Cuomo and New York City mayor Bill de Blasio have spearheaded the unsafe reopening of workplaces and schools throughout the state.

For more information and help forming a rank-and-file safety committee, contact the *World Socialist Web Site International Amazon Workers Voice* for more information.



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