

Workers at New York City produce market launch first strike since 1986

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More than 1,400 workers at the Hunts Point Terminal Produce Market in the Bronx, New York, began a strike on Sunday, January 17, over management's refusal to raise their hourly wage by one dollar. Management's counteroffer had been an insulting 32 cent raise. Also, the workers are demanding better health benefits.

The striking workers represent most of the workforce at Hunts Point, a sprawling complex with dozens of private wholesalers. It is the largest wholesale produce market in the world. A huge portion of the fresh food consumed by the 22 million people in the New York City metropolitan area flows through this market.

The striking workers range from warehouse workers to truck drivers. Their base annual salary is \$40,000, which is totally insufficient to live on in one of the world's most expensive cities. The area where the market is located has one of the lowest per capita incomes in the city. The poverty rate in Hunts Point was 37.7 percent in 2018.

The companies' rejection of the extremely modest demand for a wage increase comes after Hunts Point workers sacrificed their health for nearly a year amid a pandemic that is once again raging out of control. As many as 400 workers have been infected by COVID-19 to date, and six have died. Workers continue to struggle with poverty-level wages, while no expense has been spared to inflate the stock market and rescue the fortunes of the corporate and financial elite.

"Asking for a dollar is really nothing," a striking worker told News12 Monday, summing up the attitude on the picket line. "They should feel good about it, not telling us that we're lucky to have a job. You're lucky to have me to work for you. That's how I feel."

Dock worker Jimmy Morales told CBS that he works 10 hours per day for six days each week, no matter the weather. He said that he and his coworkers need the

raise to support their families. They refuse to return to their jobs until management accedes to their demands.

"They are not treating us fair," an anonymous worker told ABC. "They do not think that we are essential. We are essential. We've been here since the pandemic started. We have been here risking our lives and coming here to work for these people."

The enormous support for the strike among the working class, including the potential for their struggle to spread to other areas where working conditions are similar, has not been lost on officials. The Bronx borough president warned of a "ripple effect across the East Coast." He added, "It is disheartening to hear that our Hunts Point Produce Market workers and management could not come to an agreement during their negotiations. In good faith, I hope both parties will do the right thing and come back to the negotiating table immediately and reach the agreement that these essential workers deserve." Diaz's call for new negotiations is nothing other than a demand for workers to end the strike and capitulate to management.

Without the intervention of the rank and file to take over the conduct of the strike, to expand it to other sections of workers in the city and link it with a broader political fight to defend the interests of the working class, the Teamsters will do everything they can to sabotage the strike.

Tensions have long simmered at Hunts Point, where rotten last-minute deals between Teamsters Local 202 and the companies averted strikes in 2015 and again in 2018. However, under conditions of a pandemic and inequality soaring to grotesque new heights, the union was no longer able to hold back the outbreak of a strike.

Throughout the pandemic, the Teamsters and their fellow unions have collaborated with companies and both political parties in ensuring that essential and

nonessential workers alike remained on the job, whatever the costs to their health, to keep profits flowing for the wealthy. Teamster President James P. Hoffa lent his services to President Trump's herd immunity drive, participating in a panel to advise him on reopening the economy during the pandemic.

The striking workers at Hunts Point are engaged in a vital and necessary struggle. The Teamsters leadership, however, will do everything it can to isolate the strike and bring it to a quick conclusion without satisfying workers' objective needs.

Workers must follow the example of autoworkers and teachers, who are rebelling against the treachery of their own unions and form a democratically run rank-and-file committee independent of the Teamsters and wrest control of the strike from the hands of the Teamsters bureaucracy. This is the only path that can lead to victory.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will assist any workers who are interested in forming such a committee. Contact the WSWS for more information.



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