

New York City workers demand action to defend Hunts Point strikers

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21 January 2021

Teachers, transit workers and other workers in New York City denounced Tuesday's police attack on striking warehouse workers at the Hunts Point Produce Market in the Bronx and called for unified action to defend the striking workers and to fight the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in schools and workplaces.

Over 1,400 warehouse and truck drivers walked out on Sunday, January 17 to demand a dollar an hour increase over three years for workers who have suffered more than 400 infections and at least six deaths from the virus. The workers perform backbreaking labor at the world's largest wholesale food market, where workers handle more than 200 million pounds of food for distribution to grocery stores and restaurants across the region. The market generates \$2.3 billion in revenue each year, accounting for approximately 60 percent of produce sales in New York City.

The operators of the produce market, many of whom received government bailout money, have steadfastly refused to accede to Teamsters Local 202's meager wage demands. Instead, they have hired private security goons, who have been supplemented by the New York Police Department. Early Tuesday morning, hundreds of cops in riot gear, dispatched by the city's supposedly "progressive" Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio, violently attacked striking workers, arresting five and escorting scabs through the picket lines.

The battle is at a critical turning point. While there is broad sympathy for the strikers, the Teamsters and other city unions, including the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and the Transport Workers Union, have isolated the struggle. Opposed to a broader mobilization of the working class throughout the city that would lead to a direct conflict with the union-backed Democrats, the unions have brought a parade of Democrats to the picket line, including millionaire

mayoral candidate Andrew Yang and US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. But their empty gestures of support cannot cover up the fact that it is their party that sent the police to beat up and arrest strikers.

The Democrats, like the Republicans, have handed over trillions to Wall Street, while workers have borne the brunt of the deadly pandemic and the economic and social crisis. Over the last three years alone, the city has subsidized the produce market operators with over \$150 million in infrastructure development funds. Meanwhile, the official poverty rate in the Hunts Point/Longwood section of the Bronx was 40 percent, three times the city's overall rate, and 54 percent for children, even before the pandemic led to the loss of one million jobs in the city. At the same time, the bipartisan bailout of the New York Stock Exchange has raised the collective wealth of the city's billionaires during the pandemic by \$81 billion, to \$600 billion.

The Hunts Point strike is an expression of the growing anger and militancy of workers over the grotesque inequality in America and the criminal policy of both parties, which have sacrificed the lives of over 400,000 for corporate profit.

Workers throughout the city have expressed their support for the Hunts Point workers. "There's strength in numbers," Crystal, a New York City transit worker, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "If we can all get on one accord it would be extremely beneficial. There is a common ground. When Hunts Point workers are going to work they use the trains. We're eating the food they have in the market. We're all in the same struggle."

Like other frontline and essential workers, transit workers have been forced to sacrifice their lives due to the lack of PPE and other necessary measures by the transit authority and city officials. Since March,

approximately 150 New York transit workers have died from COVID-19. Now workers are confronting plans for next year to lay off more than 9,000 workers, institute a wage freeze, and cut bus, subway and train service to the bone.

Crystal said: “We know about the lack of PPE, the fear of putting your life in danger by even coming to work, performing the duties, and upper management doesn’t even care. The numbers are going back up with the COVID rate, and nothing’s shutting down. It’s kind of like the pandemic has a job, never clocking out. Now with a new strain, they’re not even taking it seriously.

“I used to live in the Bronx, not too far from the Hunts Point area. I know the market is something that’s important. They supply so much produce to so many people—and most of the stores were able to stay stocked with groceries through the pandemic. That speaks volumes to the amount of work they were doing. To know that you have people not making livable wages, that’s insane.”

Mike, an electrical technician, has experienced firsthand the isolation and betrayal imposed by International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 3 during the multi-year strike against Spectrum, beginning in March 2017. He told the WSWS, “I support the Hunts Point strikers because they are the working men and women of our country. Workers must unite. I don’t want to see what happened to me happen to them.”

Mike explained that he spent 24 years at the company building its broadband internet system from scratch. The supposed support of the unions, he said, “went down the drain when some rich execs that never worked a day in their lives didn’t want to pay the premiums for our health insurance. Spectrum bought [Local 3] off. Who says they are not doing the same at Hunts Point? We need to protect and provide for our own class first.”

The decision by de Blasio and Governor Andrew Cuomo to herd teachers and students back into infected schools, for the sole purpose of getting parents back to work, has generated widespread anger. Members of the New York Educators’ Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was established independently of the UFT, issued a statement Wednesday expressing full support for the Hunts Point struggle.

“Our brothers and sisters at the Hunts Point market have taken a courageous stance for the rights of workers everywhere. They have been earning poverty wages, while sacrificing their lives to help procure food for 22 million people amid the pandemic.” It concluded, “The Hunts Point strike must become the starting point for a counteroffensive by workers in New York, the US and internationally. We pledge to do everything we can to broaden this struggle.”

The Hunts Point workers cannot fight this struggle alone. But they must take the conduct of the fight into their own hands by forming a rank-and-file strike committee, independent of the Teamsters and other unions, to call for collective action by the working class throughout the city. The demand for a real living wage, not a dollar over three years, health care benefits and genuine protection for essential workers must be combined with the fight to close schools and non-essential businesses until the pandemic is under control, and to demand full income protection for workers and small businesses. Preparations must be made for a political general strike to win these demands and for a radical redistribution of wealth to guarantee vaccinations for all and a vast expansion of public health measures.

This fight will require the independent political mobilization of the working class against both corporate-controlled parties and the new Biden administration, which will continue to sacrifice the lives of workers to the profit interests of corporate America.

We urge striking workers to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* to take up the fight to build a rank-and-file strike committee.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact