

Teamsters rush to end strike as support grows for Hunts Point warehouse workers in New York City

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Teamsters Local 202 President Daniel Kane told striking Hunts Point Produce Market workers Thursday evening that negotiations with the operators had resumed and made it clear the union was prepared to cut a deal that abandoned its own meager demand for a \$1-an-hour raise.

Following a brutal year that left hundreds of Hunts Point Produce Market workers sick and at least six dead from COVID-19, approximately 1,400 warehouse workers and truck drivers have been fighting for five days for the wage increase.

In his remarks Thursday Kane effectively dropped the demand for a dollar raise. “Make no mistake, the prize is that contract that we have grown to know all of our lives,” Kane said. “A victory to us is keeping our contract and getting a better raise than they tried to force down our throats and keeping our union moving forward.”

He continued, “More people see you got more than your 32 cents because you struggled, they’re going to go, ‘maybe I can do that,’” he continued. “Please believe me, it’s more important than a little nickel here or a nickel there, it’s what you did.”

For the Teamster executive, whether a worker gets “a nickel here or a nickel there” is of little concern as long as the union apparatus protects its own financial interests. The son of a highly paid Teamsters International vice president, Kane pocketed at least \$214,190 last year, nearly six times the income of a striking worker, who average \$37,000 a year, roughly the poverty threshold for a family of four in one of the most expensive cities in the world. As for Teamsters President James P. Hoffa, he got \$409,000, more than 10 times what a Hunts Point worker earns with his back-breaking labor.

Kane hailed the return to bargaining on Wednesday with the companies as a victory in and of itself, despite the employers claiming they never intended to stop negotiations.

As of this writing, the union has not announced a tentative deal yet. Striking workers who talked to the WSWs expect

an agreement could come as early as Friday morning.

Workers must stop this betrayal. A rank-and-file strike committee, elected democratically by workers themselves, must take the conduct of the strike and negotiations out of the hands of the Teamsters and fight for the expansion of the struggle throughout the city and beyond. Workers should demand a 40 percent wage increase to make up for more than a decade of falling real wages, along with fully funded health care benefits and immediate vaccinations.

The move by the union to accept whatever rotten deal it can get and shut down the strike stems from a fear of igniting a broader movement of workers. The social tensions that have built up over the past year, on top of decades of soaring social inequality, threaten to disrupt the grip not just of the unions but of the entire Democratic Party, including the incoming Biden administration.

Mass anger is boiling over in the city, which has lost 26,000 people during the pandemic even as the stock market, fueled by the government bailout of Wall Street, has skyrocketed. This has increased the net worth of the city’s billionaires, including Michael Bloomberg, JP Morgan’s Jamie Dimon and Donald Trump, by \$81 billion to \$600 billion.

Over the last decade, Teamsters Local 202 has accepted one concession after another, including a two-tier wage system, with new hires paid \$2 less an hour, and a \$20 weekly health care contribution. In 2015 and 2018, the union accepted minuscule increases that left workers further behind as rent, food and transportation costs continued to rise. The Teamsters were prepared to accept another sellout contract. But this time, workers rejected the lie that there was no money and said, “No!”

The stand taken by the Hunts Point workers has inspired millions of workers in New York City and beyond who identify with the struggle of these essential workers for dignity and equality. A crew of CSX train operators refused to cross the picket line for a haul of goods to the produce

market Wednesday. Workers also succeeded in turning away truck deliveries, despite the NYPD-backed strikebreaking operation.

A Manhattan educator tweeted, “The #HuntsPointStrike is a big deal. The NYPD has assaulted striking workers and arrested them a few nights ago. The second they got released, they went straight back to the picket line!”

“Rank-and-file action is the only fix to this suppression,” he added. “As a public school teacher, I know how little the union leadership cares about working class issues, but I hope rank-and-file members show some solidarity.”

Health care workers have also turned up in support. A group of residents at Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx joined the picket line Thursday.

Lisa, a self-described low-paid nurse in the Bronx, told the WSWS, “Our struggle in the working class is the base of society here in US and around the world. It is us that are the organic movers and shakers.” She joined with the New York Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in supporting a resolution calling for the broadest possible mobilization in a common struggle with Hunts Point strikers. “We must prepare for general strike to win! Redistribution of wealth is absolutely necessary,” she said.

Mayor de Blasio is also forcing teachers and students back into the schools, with the assistance of the United Federation of Teachers union, even though there have been more than 4,000 new cases since schools reopened at the beginning of the month.

Periklis Spanos, a New York City school bus driver, told the WSWS, “The Teamsters are trying to betray the workers like the Amalgamated Transit Union did to our school bus strike in 2013. Me and my fellow bus strikers ended up paying for the strike with less pay and benefits. Then in future contracts, the way the pattern has been the union will agree to a little less each contract, so the workers are ending up with actually less.

“Small actions do not work. Instead of isolated actions, like it was for school buses, Spectrum, even GM autoworkers, we need collective action for the Hunts Point strikers. The union does not do this. I am supporting the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee that says the ranks must organize this themselves, form committees to fight for the numbers to get a general strike.

“All workers should be for joining this because all workers are facing the same problems. For school bus drivers and all workers, such a strike is also a safety measure to get shut down for the pandemic until it is safe. The demand of a strike should be for enough money for all who should stay home in the pandemic to afford this.”

The unions are opposed to such a fight and have deliberately isolated the struggle. United Food and

Commercial Workers Local 359 has not even called out hundreds of its union members at the Hunts Point Cooperative Meat Market and New Fulton Fish Market, let alone grocery store workers across the city.

The trade union executives are trying to strangle the strike because they fear it can become a catalyst for a broader movement of the working class, which would quickly develop into a direct conflict not only with de Blasio and Governor Cuomo but the incoming Biden administration. That is why they have brought a parade of Democrats, including Congresswoman and Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, to the picket lines. These are not the “friends” of striking workers but of Mayor Bill de Blasio, who deployed his cops to arrest striking workers.

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 expand the strike. The committee should call for collective action by the working class throughout the city to demand living wages and genuine protection for essential workers, along with the closure of schools and nonessential businesses, with full income protection for workers and small businesses, until the pandemic is under control.

Preparations must be made for a political general strike to win these demands and for a vast redistribution of wealth to guarantee vaccinations for all and an expansion of public health measures.

The most basic principle of this fight is that the measures needed to address the immense public health, economic and social crisis must be based, not on what the billionaires and corporate-controlled politicians claim they can afford, but on what is necessary for workers and society as a whole, not the profits of the rich.

To find out more about rank-and-file committees and to join the fight to build new organizations of working class struggle, contact us today.



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