

Teamsters union shuts down Hunts Point strike in New York City

Daniel de Vries
24 January 2021

The Teamsters union rammed through a sellout deal Saturday to end the strike of 1,400 striking Hunts Point Produce Market workers in New York City. The three-year agreement contains an insulting annual average raise of 62 cents for newer workers and 40 cents for veterans, far below the dollar an hour increase that was the main demand of the strike.

The union held a snap meeting inside one of the terminal buildings and forced through a vote before workers saw the exact terms of the deal or had any time for informed debate. Local 202 officials handed out a one-page summary, which workers were not even allowed to keep, and in a matter of minutes instructed workers to cast their votes. Many workers said they did not even see the document before the vote was taken.

The warehouse and truck drivers in the world's largest wholesale produce market average around \$18.75 an hour, or about \$37,000 a year, barely above the poverty threshold in one of the most unequal and expensive cities in America. The deal maintains the hated two-tier wage and benefit structure accepted by the Teamsters in 2009. Under the terms of the contract, the pay for new hires is \$16.75 an hour, a mere \$1.75 above the minimum wage in New York City. The companies are counting on high turnover, exacerbated by the pandemic, to keep labor costs low.

"We're making a few dollars above minimum wage. It's not right," Ronald, a striking worker, told the WSWs minutes before heading into the membership meeting. "We should be at \$25-28 an hour, and I'm not being greedy. It should be even higher."

Referring to the government bailout of the banks and large corporations, including \$15 million in forgivable Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans to the businesses at the produce market, Ronald said, "The government gave them millions of dollars, and we didn't see one penny."

Augie, who voted against the contract, told the WSWs, "We stood out here the whole time for a dollar. We've been through the whole pandemic. It's only fair, it's only right. What's a dollar to the business here? That's what we need. I

don't want to settle for anything less."

Jason, another worker who voted "no," said, "It fell far short of why I was striking. We didn't even get \$1.00 in a single year of that contract." Veterans like Jason will not receive a raise at all in the third year of the contract. Instead, they will get a one-time holiday bonus of \$1,300, he reported.

Health care costs were another major concern for striking workers. The deal largely maintains the existing substandard coverage and crushing out-of-pocket costs. William, who has been working at the market since 1995, when he was 14 years old, said his wife had surgery six months ago and he is responsible for half of the \$35,000 bill. "Thirty-five thousand—come on! That's what I make in a year," he said. "I think we deserve more, for all the hard work at the Hunts Point Market, for people who lost their lives in the pandemic in the beginning, you know?"

Workers at Hunts Point were deemed "essential" when the virus struck and have been working under dangerous conditions since. The Teamsters report that at least 400 workers have been infected with COVID-19 at the one-million-square-foot facility, which employs 2,400 workers, along with the adjacent fish and meat markets. While the union says six workers have died from the disease, workers who spoke to the WSWs said the real number was closer to 20.

Fila Herrera, who has worked at the produce market for more than 20 years, explained that contrary to the claims of the market, throughout the whole pandemic workers at his company had to provide their own masks and other protective gear. "One of my friends died in the store. He worked for like 16 years here. He was a very good man."

The deal includes no added protections for workers from the pandemic, nor does it relieve any of the other difficult working conditions that lead to frequent injury and illness.

The sellout agreement comes on the seventh day of the strike, one day before the union was required to start paying workers strike pay. While the timing is not accidental, there was also a political urgency to shutting down the strike on

the part of the unions, the Democratic Party-run city government and New York's corporate and financial elite.

The longer it went on and the more support it garnered, the greater the risk of the Hunts Point struggle becoming the catalyst for a broader mobilization of workers rebelling against the mass death and social inequality that have accelerated amid the pandemic.

Only a few miles from Hunts Point—which is located in the Bronx, the poorest urban county in America—stands the New York Stock Exchange on Wall Street in Manhattan. Since the bipartisan CARES Act passed in late March 2020 and the pumping up of the financial markets with trillions from the Federal Reserve—the S&P 500 Index of top US corporations has risen by nearly 70 percent, even as tens of millions have been thrown out of work and more than 420,000 Americans have perished from the deadly disease. Now, essential workers, who were praised by the media as “heroes,” are being told there is no money to seriously increase their poverty wages.

Anger is growing across the city, which has already lost more than 26,000 residents to COVID-19, as Mayor Bill de Blasio forces open the nation's largest school district for in-person instruction, with the backing of the United Federation of Teachers, while thousands of new infections are recorded among teachers and students. Transit workers, who lost at least 150 of their co-workers, now face threats of mass layoffs and wage cuts.

Throughout the strike there was growing support for the call advanced by the Socialist Equality Party for Hunts Point workers to take the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the Teamsters by building a rank-and-file strike committee and fighting for collective action, including a general strike, to demand a living wage and safe conditions for essential workers, and the shutdown of schools and nonessential businesses, with full compensation to workers, until the pandemic is brought under control.

In an effort to block the spread of the strike and prevent it from developing into a direct political confrontation not only with city officials but with the new Biden administration, Teamsters officials brought in dozens of Democratic Party local and national figures like US Congresswoman and Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Ocasio-Cortez told the workers to place their faith in the unions and the Democrats. She visited the picket lines twice, the latest on Friday, when she lent her support to the corrupt Teamsters bureaucrats, who had announced they were close to a deal without releasing any details to workers.

These politicians rushed in after their fellow Democrat, the supposedly “progressive” mayor of New York City, Bill de Blasio, deployed hundreds of riot-equipped NYPD cops to

escort strikebreakers and arrest workers, exposing the fact that the Democrats are a tool of the corporations just like the Republicans.

The show of force the day the market reopened after the Martin Luther King Day holiday ensured that the market would remain open with scab labor. Local 202 not only covered for the Democratic Party operation, but refused to maintain picket lines at the rear entrance to the market, allowing traffic in and out without even an appeal for workers to turn back.

The strike garnered enormous support from workers in the city and across the country, but it was deliberately isolated by the Teamsters and other unions. Under these conditions, and fully aware that the Teamsters union, which has accepted decades of concessions, would do nothing to win anything better, workers reluctantly voted to end the strike and accept the agreement.

Predictably, *Jacobin* magazine, the semiofficial publication of the DSA, published a statement promoting the Teamsters and the Democrats, writing that the sellout contract was “a victory worth celebrating and proof that going on strike works.”

The Hunts Point strike is only the first of a wave of struggles in the US and around the world into which the working class is being thrust as the second year of the global pandemic begins and all of the capitalist politicians, including the new Biden administration, continue to sacrifice workers' lives for corporate profit.

This strike demonstrates once again that the biggest obstacles to the working class intervening to stop the mass death from the pandemic are the procapitalist and nationalist unions. To advance their struggles, the Hunts Point workers and other workers coming into struggle need new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, and a new international socialist political strategy to fight for the reallocation of society's resources to save the lives and livelihoods of workers and their families.

We urge workers to contact us to get more information and to join the growing network of rank-and-file safety committees in the US and internationally.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact