

Teamsters union files lawsuit against UPS Worldport in Kentucky over unsafe conditions

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On March 1, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) Local 2727 filed a lawsuit against UPS Airlines, alleging that it has not resolved serious sanitation problems at its Worldport hub in Louisville, Kentucky.

The complaint refers to “serious, chronic sanitary concerns” during the COVID-19 pandemic that put flight crew workers in an environment where they have a high risk of becoming infected with the coronavirus. The 30-page lawsuit says that “The Union seeks injunctive relief herein to prevent the potential loss of life or serious injury of its members—and indeed, the public at large—because of the Company’s intentional disregard for their well-being.”

The lawsuit seeks to compel UPS to create a cleaning schedule for all frequently touched surfaces, including vehicles and restrooms. The corporation would also be required to come up with a “deep-cleaning” procedure for after an employee tests positive for COVID-19 and the union is told where it happened. The lawsuit claims that “serial complaints” have been filed by the Teamsters about the lack of sanitary conditions. The complaints allege that UPS failed to keep restrooms clean and stocked with paper towels, soap, wipes, and hand sanitizer. Break rooms with food preparation areas are said to be “dirty and unsanitary” with walls that are “dirty and covered with waste particles.”

The Teamsters Local 2727 represents aviation maintenance and simulator technicians at its Louisville hub, many of whom have to share equipment and workspaces. Other Worldport employees, including the large body of lower-paid warehouse workers, are covered by Teamsters Local 89, which represents UPS Air District, UPS Ground Division, UPS Freight, and

UPS Cartage (CSI) in Kentucky and Southern Indiana.

Worldport, located at the Louisville Muhammad Ali International Airport in Kentucky, is the worldwide flight hub for UPS. Approximately 20,000 work in the massive 5.2 million-square-foot (48ha) facility, processing up to 416,000 packages per hour. Worldport helps make Louisville the second-busiest airport in the United States and the fourth-busiest in the world.

The “essential” workers at Worldport clearly play a critical role in the shipping industry in the United States and internationally. Worldport is also indispensable for the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccines.

Early last year, when a health emergency was originally declared, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) issued guidance, in line with Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines, for air carrier operations that would give flight crews hand sanitizer and the requirement for positive COVID-19 cases to not come to work. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) issued a warning that airline operations like UPS might be subject to elevated risk from the pandemic. OSHA received eight complaints by the end of March 2020 about a lack of sanitizer, masks, and appropriate social distancing.

By mid-April, two Worldport employees had died of COVID-19. One of these workers was Howard Hopkins, 55. His sister and roommate recalled him worrying about the lack of masks at UPS and crowded shuttle buses with little to no social distancing. As of early February 2021, 838 of the 11,600 workers at the Worldport facility have contracted COVID-19.

Kentucky OSH has fined UPS only \$10,450 so far due to COVID-19 violations. While UPS contests the decision, they are not obligated to cease the practices

alleged in the lawsuit.

While workers have confronted deadly conditions and infections, UPS has seen its profits rise precipitously. Like Amazon and FedEx, UPS has profited immensely from the global health crisis, in large part because of increased retail shipping as commerce has shifted to the digital realm. In 2020, UPS saw revenue increase by 14.2% (\$84.6 billion) while operating profit was up 7% (\$8.71 billion).

This year-end increase is all the more staggering given the company's underwhelming earnings in the first quarter in the beginning of the pandemic. These record profits were only made possible because of the workers who continued coming in to work, putting themselves and their families at risk of infection and death.

The Teamsters union says that its members are "faring much better than the average worker right now." The union further states that "if employers purposefully discard safety guidelines, the Teamsters will make sure that penalties will exist." This attitude presupposes that their workers must go to work despite the risks, and the company might be "penalized" afterwards for putting their workers at risk.

Despite their belated threats of "penalization," the Teamsters union has actively enforced the company's unsafe work on the floor, ignored workers' concerns, and blocked any attempts by workers to take unsanctioned actions to keep themselves and their families safe. The trade unions in general have acted to enforce unsafe working conditions, acting to smother working class opposition and prevent independent struggle, while keeping workers on the lines so that the corporations can make profits without any interruptions.

In 2018, the Teamsters forced through two contracts for UPS and UPS Freight that eroded safety protections and helped UPS restructure the labor force to be more profitable. The UPS contract established a \$13 starting hourly wage for warehouse workers, up from the previous rate of \$10 per hour but still significantly less than even the \$15 hourly wage at nonunion Amazon. Invoking an undemocratic clause in its constitution, the Teamsters rammed through the deal in 2018 despite a majority "no" vote.

At the beginning of this year, the Teamsters shut down a strike of Hunts Point grocery workers in New

York with a sellout agreement that did not even achieve the demand of a paltry \$1 hourly wage increase, nor did it resolve any of the COVID-19 safety concerns in the wake of the deaths of at least six workers at the distribution center.

In opposition to the trade unions and both Democrats and Republicans, all of whom defend the profit interests of the ruling class, workers must advance their own interests through the formation of rank-and-file safety committees. These organizations, democratically controlled by the workers themselves, will allow workers to carry out a struggle for workers' control of their own health and safety, working conditions, and a program to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

Following the lead of autoworkers in the Midwest, Amazon workers in Baltimore, and educators across the world, UPS workers can establish their own committees at Worldport and all facilities. The network of rank-and-file committees will allow UPS workers to unite with Amazon and logistics workers, teachers, autoworkers, health care workers and other sections of the working class, so that the working class can coordinate a common struggle.

We urge all UPS workers at Worldport and across the world to take this fight into your facility. Contact us today for help setting up a rank-and-file safety committee at your workplace.



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