

Jacobin boosts Teamsters bureaucracy's campaign to "organize" Amazon workers

Jerry White
8 October 2021

On September 29, *Jacobin* magazine, which is affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), posted an article titled "Organizing Amazon Is Do-or-Die for the Labor Movement." The article is a pledge on the part of the DSA to do everything it can to place Amazon workers under the control of the corporatist union apparatus and industrial police force known as the Teamsters.

The article's author, Eli Rose, a DSA member in New York City described as a "UPS driver and Teamsters member," claims that it is necessary to "organize" Amazon workers under the Teamsters in order to protect the wages of UPS workers and increase the wages of Amazon workers.

The explosive growth of Amazon and its increasing dominance in the logistics industry, Rose writes, is pressuring UPS to cut costs. "Amazon and other nonunion competitors have increasingly penetrated the industry, and the massive cost advantages a company like Amazon has will rapidly put pressure on unionized competitors like UPS," Rose writes.

"For example," he continues, "while a top-paid UPS driver makes around \$40 an hour and has full family health care and a pension, most Amazon drivers make less than \$20 dollars an hour, with limited (if any) health care and no pension. Amazon warehouse workers likewise lack the health care and pension benefits that Teamsters enjoy, as well as the vacations, holidays, and scheduling perks enshrined in union contracts. How can UPS, whose 260,000 Teamster employees in the United States make up the largest plurality of [International Brotherhood of Teamsters] members, compete with such a low-cost behemoth? In the long run, it can't."

The fictional \$40 an hour wage at UPS

Rose's idyllic portrait of the wages and conditions of UPS workers is a deliberate fabrication, aimed at whitewashing the role of the Teamsters bureaucracy, which spent decades helping UPS slash labor costs long before Amazon came onto the scene.

Only a declining number of the highest seniority "Regular Full-time Package Car Drivers" will make \$40.51 an hour by next August. Under the terms of the five-year labor agreement with UPS signed by the Teamsters in 2018, a full-time driver starts at \$21 an hour, that is, just \$1 more than the \$20 an Amazon driver makes, according to Rose.

Employment site Indeed.com lists the "average hourly salary" for UPS drivers as \$21.41—about half the wage cited by Rose.

In the last contract, the Teamsters agreed to a new classification of lower-paid drivers, known as "Full-Time Combination Driver or 22.4 Combination Driver." These "hybrid" workers, who sort packages inside the warehouses and deliver them, start out at \$20.50 an hour, roughly the same as an Amazon driver. They progress to \$21.25 after 12 months,

\$22.75 after 24 months and \$25 after 36 months. If they survive four years, they top out at \$30.64, that is, \$10 less an hour, or at least \$20,000 less a year, than a regular full-time driver.

The union claims that "only" 25 percent of the driver workforce at any given hub can be these second-tier combination workers, and that they are only there to reduce weekend work and excessive overtime hours on regular drivers. The same claims were made by the Teamsters when the union sanctioned the introduction in 1974 of low-paid part-timers, originally limited to 180 per year. Today, part-timers make up two-thirds of the UPS workforce.

It is significant that Rose does not even mention the wages of UPS's part-time inside workers in his false comparison with Amazon. That's because the 2018 contract set their starting wages at \$13 an hour, two dollars less than an Amazon worker's \$15 wage! Today, three years later, a UPS part-timer makes the princely sum of \$15.50. It is noteworthy that more than four decades ago, in 1978, a UPS part-timer earned \$7.75 an hour, the equivalent of \$32.25 in current dollars.

Like Amazon, moreover, UPS already hires "personal vehicle package drivers" who use their own vehicles to deliver parcels. In mid-September, UPS purchased Roadie, a gig technology same-day delivery service with 200,000 drivers who can deliver perishable items, shopping bags and other packages not traditionally delivered by UPS drivers. Rose takes note of this growing pool of even cheaper labor, but conveniently leaves out that all of this was sanctioned by the Teamsters.

The role of the Teamsters in enforcing concessions contracts

While arguing that competitive pressures from Amazon might lead the Teamsters to reluctantly hand over concessions to UPS at some point in the distant future, Rose is forced to admit "UPS already secured some two-tier concessions in its last 2018 contract with the Teamsters, even without Amazon directly eating into its profits yet."

In fact, the Teamsters have essentially imposed such massive concessions on UPS workers that they are making essentially the same wages as workers at Amazon.

Rose includes a recounting of the industrial restructuring of the 1970s and 1980s, where he speaks about the loss of millions of jobs and the resulting fall in "union density," i.e., the proportion of unionized workers in individual industries. His narrative again leaves out the role of the AFL-CIO and unions like the Teamsters.

In every industry with high union density—auto, steel, mining, meatpacking, transportation and telecommunications—the unions colluded with the employers to break up industry-wide standards and pit workers against each other in a fratricidal race to the bottom.

The Teamsters are a case in point. After Democratic President Jimmy

Carter's deregulation of the trucking industry in 1980, the Teamsters abandoned any semblance of an industry-wide contract, granted trucking firms two-tier wages and other concessions, and collaborated in the destruction of the jobs and pensions of hundreds of thousands of workers.

As a result, between 1978 and 1993, the percentage of unionized workers fell by half, to 23 percent, and real weekly earnings of trucking industry workers fell by 28 percent. After a bitter strike in 1974, Local 804 and future Teamsters national President Ron Carey signed a deal allowing UPS to replace full-time workers with part-timers through attrition. This deal with UPS—whose only major competitor at the time was the US Postal Service—set the precedent for the proliferation of low-paid temporary workers in every industry.

Like the United Auto Workers, the United Steelworkers and other unions, the business executives who run the Teamsters enriched themselves throughout the endless series of givebacks.

Today, the Teamsters has assets and investments worth over half a billion dollars, according to the union's latest filing with the US Labor Department. It employs 231 staffers who are paid \$100,000 or substantially above that figure, including IBT General President James P. Hoffa (\$407,689), Secretary Treasurer Richard Hall (\$242,968), International Vice President Francois LaPorte (\$296,146), Special Assistants to the General President Christine Bailey (\$212,134) and Bret Caldwell (\$213,253), Trade Division Director David Bourne (\$211,833) and Staff Attorney Richard Gibson (\$207,231).

In his efforts to portray the Teamsters as a "bastion of the labor movement," Rose says nothing about the gangster methods employed by the Teamsters as it imposed the 2018 contract over the widespread opposition of rank-and-file workers.

After 54 percent voted against it, Hoffa and his cronies unilaterally forced through the five-year deal, using an obscure clause in the union constitution requiring two-thirds of the voters to reject an agreement if less than half the membership participates in the ratification vote. The resulting upheaval was only quashed by the DSA-backed Teamsters for Democratic Union faction, which blocked demands for walkouts.

Why the DSA supports the Teamsters

Jacobin and the DSA are going all out to bring the Teamsters into Amazon, not despite its role in enforcing concessions at UPS, but because of it. The DSA is a faction of the Democratic Party, which sees the strengthening of the corporatist trade union apparatus over the working class, including one million Amazon workers, as a critical strategic imperative.

The Biden administration threw its full weight behind the effort to bring the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) into Amazon's Bessemer, Alabama warehouse in the spring. That effort failed spectacularly, with only 13 percent of the total workforce at the facility voting in favor of the RWDSU. In an indication of the high-level support within the state for the union campaign, the National Labor Relations Board announced in early August that it was recommending a re-vote.

The vote in Bessemer—which Rose does not even mention—was a measure of the alienation of workers from the pro-company unions. In the aftermath of this debacle, the DSA is offering its services to try again with the Teamsters.

Ross expresses the concern that if the Teamsters do not come in now, the concessions that they will accept in the next UPS contract in 2023 and beyond will make the organization even more difficult to sell at Amazon.

"One can only imagine how UPS will dig in its feet in five or ten years from now, when competitive pressures pose an actual threat to

profitability," Ross writes. "We could see massive layoffs and givebacks, which would severely weaken the IBT and reduce the ability of militant tactics like strikes to win gains for workers. This will have a cascading effect, whereby workers will see less of the benefits of unionism, making new organizing drives harder and letting nonunion competitors expand even further."

That is, the inevitable concessions that the Teamsters will agree to in the coming period will make it even more difficult for the corrupt organization to try to convince Amazon workers that it has anything to do with defending their interests.

Jacobin sees the role of the DSA as foot soldiers for the union apparatus. Rose writes, "Efforts are underway to develop militant, rank-and-file-led unionism at Amazon that left activists can and should support." He points to the efforts of Amazonians United, a group closely associated with the DSA, as well as the Amazon Labor Union, the organization founded by former New York City Amazon worker Chris Smalls, who also is being promoted by various pseudo-left organizations.

Rose's prime example of a supposed "workers-led campaign," however, is the Teamsters operation. He enthusiastically points to the resolution passed by delegates at the Teamsters national convention in June "prioritizing Amazon organizing, creating and funding an Amazon organizing division to do so," and adds, "the IBT has suggested that this organizing drive will focus on building rank-and-file power at Amazon on the shop floor... as opposed to the more top-down, NLRB-vote-focused approach other unions have hitherto taken with the company."

Marching in lockstep with the labor bureaucracy, the DSA convention in August passed a resolution pledging expanded "support for unionizing Amazon," including by "existing organizing drives by various unions and networks." Rose even urges DSA members to hire in at Amazon so they can get jobs as "labor movement organizers."

For a genuine rank-and-file movement at Amazon

Support within powerful sections of the ruling class for strengthening the position of the unions is bound up with the unprecedented crisis produced by the coronavirus pandemic. The impact of mass death—more than 700,000 killed in the US over the past 18 months—combined with a massive increase in the exploitation of the working class is having a profoundly radicalizing impact on the consciousness of workers and youth.

Recent months have seen a significant growth of working class struggle, including the strike by Volvo workers in Dublin, Virginia, the repudiation of a UAW-backed contract by Dana auto parts workers, the strike by carpenters in Seattle, Washington, the developing strike movement among health care workers and food-processing workers, and the growing anger among educators over the dangerous reopening of schools to in-person learning.

Every one of these struggles pits workers in direct conflict with the corporatist unions, which work to suppress opposition and enforce the demands of the ruling class. When it comes to genuine rank-and-file rebellions, like the Volvo strike, *Jacobin* has nothing to say. All its energy is devoted to supporting the organizations that workers are rebelling against.

Jacobin and the DSA speak for a privileged upper-middle class layer that wants to block a rank-and-file movement of workers and prevent it from coming under the influence and leadership of genuine socialists, above all the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International.

The task of socialists is to encourage and develop the fighting capacity,

self-confidence and political understanding the working class requires by building new organizations of struggle--rank-and-file factory and workplace committees that are completely independent of and in opposition to the corporatist unions.

That is why the Socialist Equality Party and its sister parties around the world are building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to unite Amazon and other workers and coordinate their struggles across national boundaries.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact