

Nearly 120 Breakthru Beverage drivers in Illinois strike after overwhelmingly rejecting Teamsters agreement

James Martin
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Are you a Breakthru delivery driver? Contact us today by filling out the form below to tell us what you're fighting for and what your demands are. We will keep all comments confidential and anonymous.

Around 120 Breakthru Beverage delivery drivers in Illinois went on strike this week in Cicero and Rochelle after overwhelmingly rejecting a concessions agreement brought back by the Teamsters, who had hailed the initial agreement as “impressive.”

In late April, the Teamsters union claimed the deal contained “strong wage increases” and benefit improvements for the distribution drivers. The initial agreement would give drivers \$5.70 per hour more over the duration of the four year agreement. They also said it would shorten the time to reach top pay from 30 months to 18 months, a product of previous concessions made by the union.

Breakthru drivers responded to the deal brought back by the Teamsters with contempt. 89 voted “No,” only 10 voted “Yes” and the workers immediately authorized a strike.

In a pattern replicated over the last year, Breakthru drivers join the thousands of workers who have rejected sellout deals over and over again at Volvo, John Deere and other workplaces in a mood of growing militancy in the United States and internationally.

The Teamster bureaucrats were taken aback and noted the workers’s opposition was “loud and clear.” Their statement added, “Some of the biggest issues involve the overall treatment of the workforce, including concerns with the way the company uses temporary employees that work alongside the members as helpers.”

With gas prices exceeding \$5 a gallon across the

country and reaching over \$6 in various parts of the Chicago metropolitan area, Breakthru drivers are faced with the burden of growing inflationary pressures on their paycheck. Inflation is currently at 8.6 percent year over year and food prices and rents have surged as well and the Federal Reserve has increased interest rates to drive down wages, threatening a deep recession.

On June 9, the Teamsters admitted that talks with the had company resumed and then collapsed immediately. The Teamsters clearly realize their “exceptional” agreement with the company would not be sufficient to get workers to concede.

In its statement, the Teamsters admitted there were “serious issues that were not adequately addressed in the tentative agreement that fueled the rejection.” These included, “a lack of safety on the job, increasing load sizes, the inability of members to use their earned personal time, and retirement benefits.” The union had claimed “retirement benefits” as a major improvement in its initial deal.

“The members have made it perfectly clear why they voted no, and our committee is working to get a fair contract where those issues are addressed,” Mike Cales, the Secretary-Treasurer of Local 710 stated. Clearly nervous about Breakthru’s intransigence, he added, “the employer barely acknowledges these issues [and] seems tone deaf to the frustration of their employees, even with a strike authorization and a huge ‘no’ vote staring them in the face.”

No trust can be placed in the Teamsters. One Breakthru worker noted on Facebook, “our contract has been up since April and we haven’t been told anything about negotiations or them meeting.”

Elsewhere, the Teamsters are attempting to push a

sellout agreement covering 3,000 car haulers. Here too the Teamsters have praised the deal as “the most lucrative carhaul agreement.” In reality, the agreement does little to compensate for years of stagnant wages and rising inflation presently.

Just like the Breakthru drivers, the car haulers unanimously voted to authorize a strike to fight decades of concessions even as the Teamsters kept workers in the dark without releasing any details. The contract proposed to car haulers includes a 9 percent wage increase in the first year followed by 5 and 4 percent raise in the subsequent years, which will do nothing to protect workers if inflation continues to rise at the current level into the following years.

Clearly nervous about the growing rebellion of the rank-and-file workers against union-backed agreements, the newly instated Teamsters President Sean O’Brien walked the picket lines Friday. O’Brien has been conducting a tour with other union bureaucrats and is speaking alongside Senator Bernie Sanders at the pseudo-left Labor Notes conference this weekend.

O’Brien, backed by the dissident faction of the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), was elected amid historically low turnout which expressed widespread disgust and alienation on the part of workers.

As part of his election bid, O’Brien postured as an opponent to the corrupt James Hoffa Jr leadership. In fact, O’Brien was a former ally of Hoffa and deeply enmeshed in the imposition of pro-company deals upon UPS workers.

In 2018-2019, the Teamsters imposed a rotten agreement on UPS workers which they had rejected by over 50 percent. While O’Brien was initially part of the negotiations and backed by Hoffa, a factional rift broke out with Hoffa. In 2014, as an ally of Hoffa, O’Brien threatened TDU candidates with characteristic Teamsters violence and thuggery. For all his services, and the factional differences notwithstanding, O’Brien has received a salary as high as \$300,000 a year.

Despite claims by the pseudo-left Labor Notes that O’Brien’s election would bring “democracy” back to the Teamsters, the reality is that all factions of the Teamsters bureaucracy are deeply hostile to the interests of rank-and-file workers and have been for decades. Mafia-like corruption and all previous reform efforts by outfits like the TDU have resulted in further

concessions and attacks on workers.

Breakthru workers should put no confidence in the Teamsters and immediately form rank-and-file strike committees to prevent another sellout by the corrupt organization that claims to represent them. Such strike committees must demand immediate oversight over the negotiations with rank-and-file delegates overseeing all discussions.

There are over 7,000 Breakthru delivery and distribution workers across the United States and Canada who move wine, beer and other liquors that make the company billions in sales every year. All claims that there is no more to give must be rejected outright. Lines of communication must be formed between all the Breakthru workers to cut across the union’s information blackout and to begin to formulate their own demands.

Breakthru workers should also appeal to the 3,000 car haul workers and the thousands of UPS workers both in Local 710 and throughout the country, including striking CNH workers in the Midwest, and form links with the movement of the growing rebellion of workers across the globe, including in the United Kingdom and Sri Lanka.

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