

DHL strike in Rhode Island for livable wages and affordable health care meets with violence on picket line

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7 July 2022

Are you a striker at DHL in Rhode Island or a driver working at another logistics company? Contact the WSWS to tell us about your working conditions and experiences.

About 70 delivery drivers struck DHL's operations in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, on June 22 in a fight for wages to keep up with the cost of living, affordable health care, retirement benefits and safety issues.

International logistics behemoth DHL contracts out its delivery operations to Northeast Transportation Services at the DHL ServicePoint, which serves Rhode Island and southeastern Massachusetts. Teamsters Local 251 kept workers on the job when the DHL contract expired in March, and a federal mediator entered the negotiations in May.

Workers say Northeast has hired scabs to run deliveries, some of whom are being paid as much as \$55 an hour compared to the starvation wages the striking drivers have been making.

Reporters from *Uprise RI* report being shown a video of a man allegedly "threatening DHL workers while driving erratically and throwing objects at their automobile." *Uprise* was also told that a scab was arrested for allegedly threatening to kill unionized workers.

Matthew Taibi, Local 251's principal officer, told the *Providence Journal* that an armed security guard came after him with a baseball bat on July 1. The Pawtucket Police Department confirmed to the *Journal* that there had been three arrests at the facility that day but declined further comment on who was arrested or why.

Delivery services such as DHL, FedEx and UPS are notorious for their abysmal pay and working

conditions. Workers at the Pawtucket location often drive as far as the end of Cape Cod and back in a single day, a 250-mile round trip not accounting for delivery stops. They often work 12 hours a day, leaving little to no time to recover or be with their families.

Affordable health care is one of the workers' main demands. The current health care "family plan" costs \$370 a week. One worker on the picket line said the family health care plan management was offering costs \$450 a week. With drivers earning only \$18 an hour on average, health care through the company is out of reach for most workers.

Toby Leblanc told *Uprise* that he has been on the Health Connector (Obamacare in Massachusetts) for years. "I, on average, work a 50- to 60-hour week, every week. And I can't afford health care, and I've been on this job since '96," he said.

"I'm 51 years old," Toby said. "I've been doing this half of my actual life, and I make two-and-a-half dollars more than my son—my 20-year-old son who works at a gas station."

Conditions for delivery drivers at logistics companies can turn deadly. On June 25, Esteban Chavez Jr., 24, a delivery driver for UPS, died while delivering packages on his route in Pasadena, California after he collapsed inside his truck while in a customer's driveway. The most likely cause was heat stroke.

Chavez's family says he was unconscious for over 20 minutes before someone finally discovered him. Temperatures were in the upper 90s for most of that day. UPS, like many other package delivery companies, does not have air conditioning in their trucks. Temperatures in delivery cabs during the summer months can exceed well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit in

many parts of the US.

On January 12, 2021, Arron Middleton, a 31-year-old DHL-employed HGV delivery driver, was nearing the end of his shift and returning to the depot near the East Midlands Airport in the UK when he crashed and was killed.

An inquest concluded that fatigue was the likely cause of the crash and that it is believed that he fell asleep at the wheel before he drove into stopped traffic in Derbyshire. He died at the scene.

Regarding the strike in Pawtucket, DHL spokesman Robert Mintz wrote in an email, “DHL is not a party to this labor dispute,” adding, “North East [sic] Transportation is a DHL service partner that provides pickup and delivery services. The service partner has contingency plans in place for Providence, and our services are currently business-as-usual for our customers.”

Deplorable working conditions and low pay are indeed “business-as-usual” at Deutsche Post DHL Group, the world’s leading logistic company. Headquartered in Bonn, Germany, the group conducts business in more than 220 countries and employs about 590,000 employees worldwide.

Deutsche Post DHL Group includes DHL, which provides parcel and international express services and e-commerce logistics, and Deutsche Post, Europe’s largest postal and parcel service provider. Frank Appel, chairman and CEO of Deutsche Post AG, receives a total annual compensation of \$4,763,534, according to wallmine.com.

Amid the pandemic and with the increase in e-commerce, Deutsche Post DHL has generated revenues of more than €81 billion (US\$82.3 billion) in 2021 and €22.6 billion (US\$23 billion) in the first quarter of 2022. The logistics giant has hauled in these massive profits through the super-exploitation of its global workforce, provoking numerous strikes.

Logistics workers have been part of a global upsurge of workers struggles across all industries, fighting against growing inequality, the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic and the social effects of the government’s war policies.

Despite the determination of workers, however, in all cases the unions are working to sabotage these struggles by calling off strikes, limiting their duration, isolating them from other workers’ struggles or selling

them out.

- On March 15, pilots for the cargo airline AeroLogic, owned jointly by Lufthansa and DHL, carried out a one-week strike called by the Cockpit Association to demand the company negotiate a collective agreement. AeroLogic made plans to replace striking pilots with managers for the duration of the strike.

- After agreeing to a deal with the DHL Tradeteam, the Unite union called off a series of 72-hour strikes planned to begin April 6 and 10 by UK HGV drivers working on the Molson Coors beer manufacturer contract in Burton-on-Trent, England.

- In early May, Unite also called off planned stoppages by around 250 UK staff employed by DHL at a warehouse on Emerald Park distribution center in Bristol, England. DHL is under contract to Sainsbury’s supermarket chain for its stores in southwest England and west Wales.

- The GMB union called off strikes due to take place May 23 and 24 by dozens of UK delivery drivers employed by logistics firm DHL, under contract to deliver component parts for heavy construction machinery manufacturer JCB. Workers had voted by a 96 percent majority to walk out, after rejecting a 5 percent pay offer the company tried to impose.

- On May 20, delivery workers and drivers in Italy employed by DHL, TNT and FedEx took part in a one-day general strike directed against NATO’s war in Ukraine and the Draghi government’s austerity policies.

The strike at DHL in Rhode Island and industrial actions by logistics workers globally are an expression of the growing militancy of the international working class, fighting against rising inequality, the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic and the social effects of the government’s war policies. A winning strategy in these struggles requires building rank-and-file action committees, independent of the unions and their political representatives, to fight in the interests of workers.



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