

Workers at publisher HarperCollins authorize a strike

Erik Schreiber
7 July 2022

More than 250 workers for publisher HarperCollins have voted nearly unanimously to authorize a strike. The group includes workers in the company's editorial, design, sales, marketing, publicity and legal departments. Their demands include higher pay and better family leave benefits. The vote result was 99.5 percent in favor of a strike, which shows a strong desire to fight against declining real wages at a time of high inflation.

The HarperCollins workers have been without a contract since December 2021, when a one-year extension of their previous contract expired. Hence, their wages have remained constant for two-and-a-half years, while prices have soared.

"I worked at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt for two years before HarperCollins bought my division in 2021," said Carly Katz, audio coordinator, in a statement. "The company's current offer isn't even coming close to accounting for the current rate of inflation. If they can buy a whole division and still have record-setting profits, they can raise salaries to match the cost of living."

The negotiations that began in December are the first since HarperCollins acquired Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's trade division. HarperCollins refuses to include former Houghton Mifflin Harcourt workers based in Boston in the bargaining unit. Nor will the company recognize the seniority of former New York-based Houghton Mifflin Harcourt staff who now work for HarperCollins.

The company's hard line does not result from financial difficulty. HarperCollins is one of the five major publishing companies in the English language. It is a subsidiary of News Corp, which was founded by Rupert Murdoch, the Australian billionaire whose empire of right-wing media outlets extends around the

globe. During the fiscal year that ended on June 30, 2021, revenue for HarperCollins increased by 19 percent to \$1.985 billion. The company's earnings soared 42 percent to \$303 million. "We set records in any metric you use," Brian Murray, CEO of HarperCollins, told *Publishers Weekly*.

The workers who voted to strike are members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2110. Technical, office and professional workers at the New Press, the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum and New York University are also members of Local 2110.

As of this writing, the union has not scheduled a new bargaining session with HarperCollins. Nor has it announced a strike deadline. It has, however, attempted to strike a "militant" tone in its public statements. It is important to note, however, what union officials have in mind by "militancy": for example, they have blamed "historically low wages" at HarperCollins on the company's alleged lack of racial and ethnic diversity. There is nothing progressive about dividing workers along racial and ethnic lines. In fact, the trade unions have been instrumental for decades in keeping wages "historically low" in the US. The UAW bureaucracy, a cesspool of corruption, has a long and sordid history of imposing concessions on its members.

In June, the union collaborated with Mayor Michelle Wu of Boston to force an austerity contract on workers at the city's Museum of Fine Arts (MFA). Like the HarperCollins workers, these workers are members of Local 2110. Under the new contract, two-thirds of workers will receive a minimum 5 percent raise this year and 3 percent increases in the contract's second and third years. The current rate of inflation is 8.6 percent, and inflation is expected to remain high for some time. Thus, these putative raises represent cuts to workers' real wages. Even before inflation reached this

high level, workers struggled to make ends meet in Boston, one of the country's most expensive cities to live in.

Local 2110 also betrayed a struggle of graduate student workers at New York University (NYU) last year. The workers' hourly wage will rise by the end of 2026 to \$30 an hour. What that means is that over the course of the next four years, the allegedly generous increase will be entirely wiped out by inflation. In New York City, the country's most expensive city, even \$30 an hour is inadequate for a family. Moreover, only a portion of NYU graduate student workers will receive these raises.

During the strike, the union withdrew its demand that the contract forbid job cuts, thus giving the university a way to compensate for the raises. In addition, the contract establishes a fund to pay for workers' out-of-pocket health care expenses that will total \$700,000 by the end of the contract. But workers' total out-of-pocket costs are estimated to be \$2.4 million. Workers' disgust with the agreement was reflected in the ratification vote. Even after the union extended the voting period by a week, turnout was barely more than 50 percent.

UAW bureaucrats have not only suppressed workers' wages, but also helped themselves to workers' dues payments. Former UAW presidents Gary Jones and Dennis Williams are serving federal prison sentences for stealing millions of dollars in members' dues money, which they spent on luxury goods and expensive vacations. This corruption extends to the local level as well. In March, Timothy Edmunds, former secretary-treasurer of Local 412 in Warren, Michigan, pleaded guilty to embezzling \$2.2 million in union money.

Driven by the pandemic and consequent economic crisis, workers are increasingly rebelling against this corrupt organization. In May 2021, workers at Volvo voted 91 percent to reject a contract that the UAW had endorsed. Since then, workers have rejected at least eight UAW-backed contracts that favored the companies. Most recently, workers at auto parts company Ventra Evart voted 95 percent against a rotten agreement that the UAW's bargaining team had endorsed unanimously.

Will Lehman, a worker at the Mack Trucks assembly plant in Macungie, Pennsylvania, has announced his

candidacy for UAW president. Lehman's campaign, which the *World Socialist Web Site* endorses, aims to highlight the impossibility of reforming the UAW. "Change will only take place to the extent that we organize our independent strength through the formation of rank-and-file committees composed of and controlled by workers, not bureaucrats," said Lehman. His demands include workers' oversight over contract negotiations and the drafting of a program based on workers' needs, not on what the companies say they can afford. Significantly, Lehman also points out that the global character of production requires workers to unite internationally against the corporations.

Unless HarperCollins workers take the initiative away from the UAW, the union will drag out negotiations, isolate workers and coerce them into ratifying a contract that does not meet their needs. HarperCollins workers must learn the lessons of the struggles at the MFA, NYU, Ventra Evart and Volvo. They will not be able to win a livable wage or adequate family leave benefits without rebelling against the UAW and waging an independent fight. They will find a ready source of strength if they reach out to other sections of the working class for support.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact