

“A job in which you cannot make a living”

## HarperCollins workers in New York City stage one-day strike for liveable wages

Erik Schreiber, Elliott Murtagh  
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Workers at book publisher HarperCollins held a one-day strike on Wednesday at the company’s New York City headquarters. The editorial, design, legal, marketing, sales and publicity employees have been without a contract since December.

Workers had voted by 99.5 percent to authorize the strike action. About 100 workers and supporters picketed on a sweltering summer day to demand better pay and improved family leave benefits. This reflects the growing anger among the company’s workforce.

A HarperCollins worker on the picket told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “If you want to work in publishing, New York City is the place to be. But if you have debt and get a job in which you cannot make a living, you cannot even pay back the debt. We can go through multiple internships for two years that pay \$14 or \$15 an hour. Full starting pay, depending on your tier, is \$40,000 to \$45,000—in expensive New York! We see others doing this work for \$60,000.

“We all are in this because we are passionate about books. There are 500 other people who want this job, yet we are likely to get pushed out of our neighborhoods because we cannot afford it. I am struggling to live off this minimum wage, so I cannot enjoy the work.”

An associate editor on strike at HarperCollins took to Twitter to describe the conditions she faced when first starting out working in publishing a few years ago, making less than \$26,000 a year. “Living in a cockroach-infested firetrap with no A/C and no kitchen, my salary went entirely toward rent, transportation, and frozen dinners, barely covering the basic costs of living with nothing left over to save for a move, let alone any kind of emergency... My salary [did] not cover the cost of student loans, let alone the costs involved with caring for a loved one.”

The HarperCollins worker stated that she was speaking out on these conditions—which, she revealed, led to her being suicidal—“to illustrate as clearly as I ever have how damaging low wages are on an employee’s health, morale and general quality of life.”

HarperCollins is one of the five biggest publishers in the English language. Like other corporations, it has been making huge profits during the pandemic. For the fiscal year that ended on June 30, 2021, the company’s revenue increased by 19 percent to \$1.985 billion. “We set records in any metric you use,” CEO Brian Murray told *Publishers Weekly*. The company’s management

intends to give as little of this wealth as possible to the workers who created it.

Unlike most workers in the publishing industry, the HarperCollins workers are members of a union. They belong to Local 2110 of the United Auto Workers (UAW), which has had a presence at the company for more than 80 years. The UAW has agreed to and helped the company maintain the very miserable conditions against which workers are now rebelling.

The publishing industry has historically paid wages that are barely at subsistence level in the big cities in which the industry is concentrated. The companies systematically take advantage of workers’ love of literature and willingness to make sacrifices for it. Management often pressures employees to work long hours without overtime. A common saying in the industry is that you can’t work in publishing without substantial financial support from one’s spouse or family.

Starting pay at both Hachette, a publisher which is not unionized, and HarperCollins is \$45,000 for workers in New York City. The average salary for HarperCollins workers, \$55,000 per year, is grossly inadequate in New York, one of the most expensive cities in the world, particularly for workers with spouses and children.

The UAW kept workers on the job for more than six months after the expiration of the contract before it even held a strike vote. During that time, inflation has soared, reaching 9.1 percent last month. The contract that expired in December 2021 was an extension of an old contract that had expired in December 2020, which the union extended for one year. The HarperCollins workers thus have had the same wages, unadjusted for inflation or the rising cost of living, for two-and-a-half years.

After limiting the strike to only one day, the union set up a strike fund and took donations instead of paying workers out of the \$826 million UAW strike fund. On top of this, the UAW has not breathed a word of the struggle to the 400,000 other active UAW members in the auto industry.

The UAW has not given workers any information about the current status of negotiations, including what progress is being made. Workers who spoke to the WSWs on the picket line said that they did not even know what specific demands (e.g., with regard to raises) the union was making to the company. The entire bargaining process is taking place behind closed doors without any input from the workers whom it affects.

The purpose of closed-door negotiations is to keep workers in the dark about the inadequate terms that the union is proposing. In every industry, the unions are imposing contracts with raises of 2 or 3 percent, or a fraction of current inflation. These union-backed contracts enable the companies to continue to rake in huge profits.

Negotiations with HarperCollins should be open to all workers in the bargaining unit. They should be live-streamed so that workers can oversee the process and fight for what they objectively need. But the UAW will not agree to such conditions. It favors secrecy so that it can conspire more easily with management to enforce terms that protect the company's profits.

Despite their justified anger and visible determination, HarperCollins workers will not be able to win a living wage and a truly human existence if they remain shackled to the UAW. They need to challenge the bureaucratic strangling of their struggle through a rank-and-file committee that is democratically controlled and independent of the union officialdom. This is the organizational form through which workers can wage a serious and determined fight against the company for demands that correspond to their needs, including a living wage in one of the world's most expensive cities.

This is a critical task for workers in every industry and occupation, who are up against crushing inflation and stagnating wages.

A freelance copy editor who came out to support her friend on the HarperCollins picket spoke to the WSWS about the broader issues that workers, especially young workers, face. "We all have to work somewhere, but no one's willing to pay us anything. You have to take whatever you get. I'm 23 and work in the gig economy, where you never know when you're going to be out of a job. There's no security at all.

"For instance, a contract I've been working under is now running out. They initially told us we'd get bonuses; now they're saying we won't get bonuses. And there's really nothing we can do about it. I never know when I'll be cut off or out of a job. I don't have a constant source of income. It's a very stress-inducing way of living." She added, "People my age and a little younger or older have never lived in a world where we could look ahead to a bright future."

Workers are launching a wave of strikes and social protests throughout the United States and across the world. From auto parts workers at Ventra Evart in Michigan to port truckers in California, workers are fighting against attacks on their living standards. This is an international strike wave that also encompasses rail workers in the United Kingdom, shipbuilders in South Korea and manufacturing workers in Turkey. Workers are demanding what they need to survive, not what the capitalist class is willing to concede.

This growing international movement of workers needs new organizations of struggle. The call for a break with the old organizations is at the center of Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman's campaign for UAW president. Lehman's goal is to foster a mass movement by rank-and-file workers internationally in opposition to the bureaucratic apparatus.

In a statement written to the striking HarperCollins workers, Lehman emphasized the importance of such a movement and the

need to develop rank-and-file committees in which the genuine aspirations and needs of workers can find expression:

The UAW is not operating in your best interests, but you don't need to listen to their instructions about the "right" way to conduct a fight. Instead you need to take matters into your own hands. You should form a rank-and-file committee to conduct a real fight, independent of the bureaucracy and composed of rank-and-file workers.

This type of organization would provide you with the means to democratically control your own struggle, in opposition to the betrayals of the bureaucracy. It would also give you the means to appeal for broad, international support from workers all over the world. HarperCollins management is in touch with Murdoch in Australia, and there's no reason that you can't communicate with workers elsewhere as well. Knowledge of your fight needs to spread, because a lot of workers would support you if they knew about your situation. But this is not going to happen under the UAW's direction. Get in touch with other workers and get the word out.

The fight of workers anywhere is the concern of workers everywhere. An injury to one is an injury to all. The outcome of your struggle affects conditions for other workers, whether they realize it or not. You and I are in different industries, but we are all UAW members. But you can't keep relying on a union apparatus that has proven itself, time and time again, to be working against your interests. A fight needs to grow if it's going to win. The only way your fight will be won is if you conduct it independently and to broaden it by reaching out to other workers.



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