

UPS driver reprimanded for stopping to sip water in heat

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Are you a delivery driver? We want to hear from you. Contact us to tell us how heat and other issues affect your job, and what you think needs to be done. Comments will be published anonymously.

A UPS driver in New York City says that a supervisor reprimanded him for taking a 47-second pause to sip water amidst a heat wave, according to an exposé by local investigative news outlet *The City*.

The report comes as more and more UPS drivers report falling ill working in sweltering heat in trucks that lack air conditioning. One UPS driver, Esteban Chavez Jr., age 24, died in June of suspected heat stroke while delivering packages in Pasadena, California.

Home video footage released last week shows an unidentified UPS driver in Scottsdale, Arizona collapse on the porch of a house where he was delivering a package. Temperatures in the area have been above 100 degrees for weeks.

Digital news outlet *The City* reported a separate incident where the New York driver reprimanded for a water break, 26 year-old Nick Gubell, had delivered more than 200 packages on his route in central Manhattan when he fell ill near the end of his shift, suffering from a headache and clammy hands. He said that when paramedics arrived they ripped open his shirt, covered him with ice packs and took him to the hospital where he remained until 2:00 am.

At least four New York City residents died in the six-day heat wave that began July 19 and saw temperatures move well into the 90-degree Fahrenheit range. Record heat impacted large areas of the central and eastern United States. According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1,300 die each year due to heat exposure. The US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) said 400 workers died on the

job from heat exposure between 2010 and 2020.

In the summer months, temperatures in the cargo compartments of UPS trucks reach 140 degrees Fahrenheit. The heat compounds the stress drivers already feel due to overbearing management demands to adhere to burdensome and unrealistic delivery schedules.

The City also reported several other incidents among New York UPS drivers:

- Another driver in Red Hook, New York was taken to urgent care and then the emergency room by a coworker and a supervisor after experiencing dizziness while delivering packages in 95-degree heat.

- The day before, Chris Cappadonna, age 26, said he sought emergency care after experiencing heat exhaustion an hour into working his shift in Brooklyn. He was moving heavy furniture when two city sanitation workers came to his aid. They let him sit in their air-conditioned truck and he later went to urgent care and then the emergency room.

- Another UPS driver, Angelique Dawkins, age 50, starting hyperventilating while on her route in Brooklyn during the heat wave and went into a nail salon to cool off and take a short rest. “We’re told to cool down, drink water, sit in the shade — when the temperature’s that high, there is no shade,” she said. “You get to the point where you say, ‘I can’t take it anymore.’”

There are 450,000 UPS delivery drivers with some 350,000 covered by Teamster contracts. Workers complain that management invests in new automation technology, drones, surveillance cameras and tracking devices, but not basic health and safety measures like air conditioning.

UPS drivers have long demanded that the Teamsters union insert contract language to require the company to install air conditioning on delivery trucks, but the

union has always dropped the demand during the course of contract negotiations.

In response to the recent deaths and hospitalizations, UPS management defended its practices, declaring in a statement to *The City*: “The health and safety of our employees is our highest priority. UPS drivers are trained to work outdoors and to manage the effects of hot weather. Preparation, rest, hydration and maintaining good health practices are key to working outdoors.”

UPS says it offers drivers fans “on request.” But according to *The City*’s report, drivers report those requests are often arbitrarily denied. Once outside air temperatures reach over 90 degrees, fans do little to provide cooling, essentially just blowing the hot air around the truck.

The reports of UPS drivers collapsing in the heat drew hundreds of posts on Facebook, a large number critical of both company management and the Teamsters union. Drivers from the US Postal Service and private delivery companies said that they faced similar problems with the heat and management indifference.

One worker wrote, “I’ve been with UPS for 17 years now. We need air conditioning in the UPS warehouse too! It literally feels like you’re working in a metal shed or garage with the door shut. It should be illegal in the State of Texas. They know how hot it is here.”

Another said: “UPS and many other companies don’t and won’t care sadly all for the sake of profits and “appeasing the customer” just because you “trained them” to be heat tolerant doesn’t mean a body can or will be. Yes, maybe he needed to drink more water or have some but a body can only take what it can handle no matter what you do. Take care of your self. These places won’t.”

A UPS driver from Georgia posted, “You think this new [Teamsters] president is going to put a/c in the contract? I do know that it’s not going to happen regardless who the president is. But they’ll act concerned when the next person falls out.”

A UPS distribution center worker posted: “What about the employees who work in the hub it’s so hot in there we had a girl just this weekend who mildly fainted and hurt herself with a bulk package... In small sort at 4 am it was over 80° we need better ventilation and AC in the hub as well... It gets so hot we get

headaches, over heat and become slightly disoriented as well as mood changes and exhaustion... This all needs to be addressed before we lose more employees to the overwhelming heat...”

In the face of mounting anger, last week Teamster President Sean O’Brien issued an open letter calling on UPS to take measures to improve conditions for drivers, including providing fans in every truck, cooling neck towels, consistent supplies of water and ice, and more breathable uniforms, as well as hiring more drivers to reduce workload. However, he proposed no action to enforce these demands. Significantly, he failed to mention the lack of air conditioning on delivery trucks.

Workplace-related heat injuries are underreported since workplace safety organizations only record actual hospitalizations. Most of those suffering from heat-related sickness go to the emergency room and are never admitted as patients. Nonetheless, they may be off work for weeks.

OSHA inspectors have documented heat index readings of 126 inside UPS trucks. Workers say they have recorded much higher temperatures in their vehicles, which can feel like saunas.

Rachel Licker, a climate scientist with the Union of Concerned Scientists, told *The City*, “We know it’s a pretty basic equation in terms of how to keep people safe, and if someone dies on the job because of the heat-related illness, it typically was a preventable death, and it’s tragic.”

UPS claims that it does not install air conditioning in its trucks because it would be “ineffective” given the frequent stops. It makes the same argument for its warehouses where loading dock doors are frequently left open.

Workers are well aware, however, that it is not “effectiveness” that keeps them from having air conditioning, but the subordination of all other management concerns to corporate profits.



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