

“Publishing made me absolutely miserable.”

Publishing workers speak out on their conditions following HarperCollins strike

Elliott Murtagh
7 August 2022

On July 20, workers at book publisher HarperCollins in New York City held a one-day strike demanding better pay and improved family leave benefits amid soaring inflation. HarperCollins workers, who have a starting salary of just \$45,000 a year, have been working without a contract since December. Their union, United Auto Workers Local 2110, is still in contract negotiations with management.

In conversations with workers on the picket who spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters, many raised the fact that the very low pay paired with increasing workloads at HarperCollins is the norm working in publishing today, no matter what company one works for and that “passion doesn’t pay the rent.”

Following the strike, publishing workers from across the US spoke to the WSWS on the broader working and living conditions faced in the industry, which have caused many to leave their jobs. Their names have been changed due to their desire to remain anonymous.

Rebecca, who left publishing for another industry earlier this year, had worked full-time in publishing for seven years in New Jersey and Colorado in both production and subsidiary rights. Before this, she worked an eight-month unpaid internship in Boston.

Describing the working conditions, Rebecca said, “There was a lot of emotional pressure. A big push at both jobs [was] that we were doing a missions-based job, that we should be putting in our all for our authors and readers because we were creating something good for society. And there was a sense of young people had to put up with a lot of shit to ‘pay their dues’.

“I knew many assistants who were afraid of their supervisors, but they were pillars in the industry, so you had to just suffer them for a few years to get ahead. I had a very toxic manager, and I was the third of four employees in three years to leave/threaten to leave the company in less than one year under her management. They didn’t make reporting changes until the fourth employee (an older, more experienced person) complained. The three junior employees were just ushered out the door.”

Rebecca also spoke about the effect of the pandemic at work. “Working from home had the positive effect in that it showed that most of us could easily do our jobs remotely. It, however, had a horrible effect on workloads and the publisher’s acknowledgement of burnout. Early on in the pandemic, houses were tightening their

belts, hiring less, asking people to do extra to get us through a tough time. And then, when we started getting record profits, they kept the belts tight and acknowledged our ability to do that extra work in a crisis as meaning that just became the new standard work load.

“In production/printing/manufacturing, we were faced with the disastrous supply chain problems every day. But, despite our workload per title going up 50-100 percent, we got no extra help. Despite presenting qualitative and quantitative evidence of increased workload for over a year, we were continuously told there was no budget for new employees, no budget for raises, no budget for promotions.”

On her living conditions while working in publishing, Rebecca said, “I haven’t ever been able to live alone on a publishing salary. I’ve lived in four apartments with four different roommates. When I relocated to New Jersey for my first job (pay around \$36,000), I didn’t get any relocation assistance (I did ask). I found an apartment and roommate on craigslist for about 40 percent of my take-home pay, and we had cockroaches. My next apartment was a little more expensive but cleaner. We had constant issues with the AC going out when it was over 90 [Fahrenheit]. My roommate was an older co-worker who had also never been able to live alone on her publishing salary.

“I also got no relocation assistance moving to Boulder, CO and my rent with roommates was 30-40 percent of my take home pay. I also spent another 20 percent of my take home pay on my student loans. My roommates in Colorado worked in tech making 2-3x what I did, so they typically paid more of the rent and in exchange I did a lot more work around the apartment.

“I also almost always had a second job while working in publishing so I could save a little or pay off my loans slightly faster. In New Jersey, I worked at a coffee shop 12-20 hours a week (most weekends). In Colorado, I worked in a nursing home kitchen 12-20 hours a week and one summer as a census enumerator. I didn’t get to stop working extra jobs until I moved in with my boyfriend (now husband) and he paid more than 75 percent of our rent and expenses.”

Rebecca left her publishing job in May. “I left my position after 13 months of work-induced panic attacks. I was the third of four very talented people to leave my team in a seven-month window. We all cited burnout, lack of recognition, low pay, and better

outside opportunities as our reasons.

“I was unwilling to continue to work in publishing with the conditions and salary as they are. I was no longer willing to experience bi-weekly stress panic attacks, fighting for raises and promotions for my reports to five levels of managers who wouldn’t fight to change anything; getting 2-3 percent raises under 7 percent plus inflation, doing the work of two or more people, seeing my work load continue to grow with no sign of slowing, getting paid in ‘perks’ like free books from the sample shelf, all for the ‘mission’ of ‘publishing good books’.

“I have loved books since I was four years old. I dreamed of working in book publishing since I was 16. I paid \$40,000 after scholarships to get a degree in publishing, and then publishing made me absolutely miserable.” She added, “Publishing destroyed for me the idea of finding joy and fulfillment at work.”

Rebecca also commented on the growing strike wave of workers taking place this year throughout the US and internationally and the need for workers to unify across industries and national boundaries. “I completely agree with the need to unify and take collective action for fair compensation for our work. The only way to get them to act is to put them in a bad position.

“Earlier this summer I read ‘A Psalm-for the Wild Built’ by Becky Chambers. In this futuristic sci-fi story, robots doing the majority of human society’s factory labor become sentient, collectively leave behind human society and force humanity to completely adapt their societies and economies after this upheaval (spoiler: the change is good for humanity). This was the best metaphor for collective action I’ve read, and it hit me square in my soul.

“Humans (i.e., Corporations) will never voluntarily give rights and/or give up profits for the good of those who make those profits. Unless we (the robots!) decide to leave and be done, regardless of the impact upon the system, they will never be forced to do things differently. [If] corporations can’t ‘afford’ raises and larger staffing and better conditions under the current system, that means the system needs to change, not that the workers should just suffer.”

Sarah is a current HarperCollins worker who took part in the July 20 strike.

“Publishing is a lot of work with little pay—my manager usually won’t approve overtime, so I’m super behind on work—and that can be really tough both physically and mentally.” Commenting on her living conditions, she said, “I’m lucky to have roommates I love and a partner to help with expenses. Publishing’s salary would never be feasible if I were on my own.”

We explained to Sarah that the billionaire class and corporations, including HarperCollins, have seen record profits over the past few years of the pandemic—the same period in which millions of workers around the globe have been thrown into struggle for their livelihoods.

“I think no one needs billions of dollars.” Sarah replied. “Meanwhile, people are skipping meals to not get evicted from their overpriced apartments.” She added, “That money should be divvied up amongst the hardworking employees who make companies function, not hoarded by a few at the top.”

Sybil, who also switched industries, worked for five years in

academic publishing in New York City. She started as an intern for a major publisher and then worked as an editorial assistant and media editor at two other publishing houses.

Speaking about the working conditions she faced, Sybil told the WSWS, “The morale was often low, and pessimism was thick in the air. It is apparent that everyone is overworked and under-compensated.

“In every role that I had, teams were impacted by the classic [cost-cutting] ‘reorganization’ and left to fend for themselves.

“My first full-time publishing job offered \$35,000 a year in 2016, and that was considered average back then. I switched to another publisher and took a \$2,000 pay cut. I lived at home with low monthly expenses, so I didn’t struggle as much as my colleagues who were stretching \$33,000 by having five roommates and tapping into their little savings to make things work.”

She spoke about the role the pandemic played in her workplace. “In the academic publishing space, the pandemic caused a demand for online supplements, pre-tailored courseware and e-books skyrocketed.

“A few months after the pandemic [began], we had layoffs that impacted my general team of around 25 folks. This resulted in the assistants and associates to take on double the workload (schedules, media plans, different subject matter hiring circuits) with no additional compensation or time off to recharge from being overworked. A lot of people, including myself, left the company due to low wages, no mobility and lack of follow through from higher management.”

In response to the growing international strike wave this year, Sybil stated, “I believe people have the right to benefits, healthy working conditions and livable wages, and the only way those changes happen is through these massive movements. Applying pressure to industries is the only way we can make change happen. There is strength in sending the message that the time of ‘overworking and underpaying’ in one of the most expensive cities is over.”

We also discussed with Sybil the campaign by Mack Trucks autoworker Will Lehman for UAW President. Lehman’s campaign is aimed at building an independent movement of rank-and-file workers fighting for what workers actually need, not what the corporations say they can afford.

“This is a cause I can get behind as corporations do not care for their bottom line and they make it clear with the wages they offer. I agree with workers receiving what they actually need in order to improve their life financially and mentally.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact