

“It is 140 to 150 degrees in the back of those trucks”: UPS workers speak out about intense heat and other abuses at the logistics giant

Our reporters
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United Parcel Service (UPS) workers are angry over the deaths and hospitalizations from working conditions with no air conditioning or protection from the heat which has blanketed the United States throughout the summer.

According to a report published by *NBC News* based on interviews with over a dozen UPS workers, “more workers seem to be getting sick and have been hospitalized because of the heat than ever before.”

While many workers experience increased instances of heat exhaustion, dehydration and fatigue, the report stated it was difficult to quantify the total number because such incidents are “generally under reported and only include in-patient hospitalizations.”

UPS made a record \$12.9 billion profit in 2021, more than 10 times 2020’s reported \$1.34 billion in profits. “The external environment is challenging due to the ongoing impacts of the pandemic, labor tightness, upstream supply chain jams and rising inflation,” said UPS Chief Executive Officer Carol Tomé in an investors’ call last February, reported the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

However, “we are maniacal about controlling what we can control,” gloated the executive, alluding to the dictatorial regime running inside the company’s warehouses, which includes unsafe working conditions, increasing exploitation for ever-lower pay, and days which sometimes last 14 hours.

In late June, Esteban Chavez, Jr., a 24-year-old delivery driver in Southern California collapsed and died while on deliveries. The *New York Times* reported on another fatality that occurred in 2021. Jose Rodriguez, 23, was found dead from heat exhaustion at the end of his shift. His mother, Jorja Rodriguez, told the *Times* she had “sent her son to work that morning with a cooler full of water and energy drinks and told him to ‘take it easy.’” His body was found in the company lot.

“I called his name so many times, thinking that if he would hear my voice, he would wake up,” she told the *Times*.

Such incidents have noticeably shaken many workers, who

have joined protests across the country in opposition to the corporate giant’s abuses.

“We just talked about the death of Esteban Chavez in California and the driver in bad condition on the Arizona videotape at this rally,” said a worker outside a Brooklyn UPS facility to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters earlier this month. “[The Teamsters] say they are going to fight for A/C in the contract, and if UPS doesn’t give it, we will go on strike.”

A worker explained the strain of delivering in such high levels of heat. “I need to stop and cool off for a half an hour somewhere to make it through the day. I have to do that to survive.”

“There are no more drivers being hospitalized like last week as far as I know, but I’m sure they are covering it up,” said another, who asked not to be named for fear of company retaliation. “I got dizzy at the end of the day Friday. The back of the truck with packages is like an oven.

“When you are carrying food products, the smell of the toxins from the food like pesticides with the fruit is cooked out, and the smell is horrible and overwhelming. We deliver live packages of insects and fish. They load packages into the truck until it is stuffed, and the live packages have their survival jeopardized.”

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), UPS has had at least 270 workers sickened by heat exhaustion. Many were hospitalized. This hazard has been made worse by the company, which has invaded workers’ privacy and autonomy in violation of contractual requirements.

“The trucks are hot. UPS’s answer is to take a ‘Cool Solution.’ That means take a break here and there for 10 minutes,” said another worker at the Brooklyn rally speaking to the WSWS. “It is 140 to 150 degrees in the back of those trucks. [They want you to] take a little exhaust fan like they hand out, and all it does is blow the hot air around.”

In early August, supporters of the Teamsters for a

Democratic Union (TDU), an opposition caucus which is supporting the present Teamsters leadership, posted pictures of UPS's in-vehicle temperature gauges. The readings (pictured) said that the interior of their delivery trucks were sometimes higher than 130 degrees.

The company has denied allegations that it is placing its employees in harm's way. "The health and safety of our employees is our highest priority," stated a public statement cited by the *New York Times*.

Elsewhere, the company has touted its "Cool Solutions" program, which includes "providing additional water, ice, electrolyte replacement beverages and fruits with high water content," as well as providing heat-dispersing clothing.

"Instead of giving us better solutions, UPS gives us 'Cool Solutions,'" said a worker in Brooklyn, regarding management's inefficient response to the heat hazard. "They spent \$2 million on 'Cool Solutions.' If you take 10 minutes breaks from the sun, you compromise your rate. Then they punish you for your breaks."

Other workers emphasized this point.

"I will tell you how it works," said another worker in Brooklyn. "The safety committee, which is the company's safety committee, tells you that if you get overheated and feel bad, you take stops to go into cool areas and drink cooling liquids. But you still only have your scheduled one hour off for lunch. So, when you do need to stop and cool off in a cool area with cool drinks, the supervisors are all over you for 'stealing time from the company.'"

This happens even though "you are doing what the safety committee said, but because the union and shop stewards say nothing to defend you, you get written up and punished" said a worker from Pennsylvania. "There's no water for workers, the company constantly says, 'oh we just ran out of water,'" he continued.

The sham character of the company's "safety" program was further evidenced earlier this month when a worker reported they had been reprimanded for stopping to take a sip of water.

Other workers denounced the company's surveillance of its workforce. "They just want to spend more on surveillance equipment...They write you up for anything. Then you have to talk to the boss, and after enough of those they can fire you. That is the way they move up in management."

"They will follow you in their personal car and film you to see if you are doing anything that possibly violates their rule book. That happens a lot. What is it going to take? 30, 40 or 100 heatstroke incidents or deaths?"

In 2021, the company began installing Lyxt Drive-Cam cameras in delivery trucks. According to a post on the TDU's blog site, while such devices "can be set to only

record when they are triggered by an incident, like swerving or sudden braking," they "can also be set up to continuously record and even live-stream video and audio footage from outside and inside the truck."

Under conditions where workers are forced to the breaking point during their shifts, this added invasion of privacy can lead to massive abuses. "All the workers, DHL (delivery services), UPS, Amazon, these companies expect you to just piss in a bottle because you don't have time," said the worker from Pennsylvania.

"Some girls will literally pee in a bag, the plastic bag that they give you to wear when it's raining. Then they will throw it away at a trash can whenever they can. We've had people s— in a bag to just not drive 10 mins out to get to a bathroom."

The Teamsters have tried to diffuse the mounting outrage by hosting a number of public rallies across the country to protest these conditions in addition to other posturing.

Earlier in August, Teamsters president Sean O'Brien sent a public statement to UPS demanding "safety plans and managerial policies" from the company as well as information on "which UPS facilities are not being properly equipped by the company, and why."

Despite O'Brien's references to "UPS executives... inside their air-conditioned, C-suite offices," the Teamsters have no strategy to resist the company's abuses.

An article published in *Business Journal* ("6 Issues That Could Push UPS Teamsters To Strike") quotes the Teamsters boss. According to O'Brien, even if anger is high over the 2018 UPS contract, which was forced through on a technicality despite a majority "no" vote, it will be "difficult" to "walk backwards," i.e., to undo the concessions of the illegitimate contract.

"Excessive overtime," one of the Teamsters' "6 issues," is called a "byproduct of Saturday service." That is, it was a byproduct of the concessionary contract which UPS and the Teamsters forced down members' throats. "We're open to finding a solution to the seven-day week delivery because what (sic) the competition is doing," conceded O'Brien, mildly criticizing the present situation, is "not working."



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