

Sysco employees strike in western New York and Boston

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More than 230 drivers and warehouse workers in Syracuse, New York, as well as 30 other Sysco drivers located in Buffalo, New York, affiliated with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters Local 317, are continuing a strike they began September 27. The Teamsters union contends the company repeatedly refused to bargain for a new contract. The previous contract expired August 19, but the union did not call a strike at the time. Now the Teamsters have declared an Unfair Labor Practice strike (ULP) under provisions of the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (NLRA).

By declaring the strike over unfair labor practices, rather than contract issues, the Teamsters leave open the possibility that the union can end the strike without a new contract in place, or even a vote by the membership. This is a tactic that the unions often employ to wear down workers' resistance to concessions.

Another 300 Teamster Local 653 Sysco drivers in Boston also went on a ULP strike this past Saturday when their contract expired and after the company made its final offer. The company is continuing operations with scab truck drivers.

The Teamsters are also sending some of the striking workers from Syracuse and Boston to other Sysco facilities to set up picket lines, which are currently being honored by 250 members of Teamster Local 104 in Phoenix, Arizona. Additionally, on Monday, a newly formed section composed of 50 graduate workers affiliated with Teamsters Local 170 at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, went on strike after efforts to gain their first contract stalled.

Workers are seeking higher pay to keep pace with inflation and improvements in benefits, as well as an end to excessive forced overtime of 14 to 16 hours per day, likely without an overtime premium being paid

after eight hours. Workers are particularly angry over the fact that while throughout the pandemic they were kept on the job, with management claiming they were essential, Sysco is refusing to compensate them justly.

In 2019, Sysco had revenue of over \$60 billion. It is the nation's largest food warehouse and distribution company, with 66 percent of its sales to restaurants. The strike is already having a large impact, with many restaurants reporting that they are scrambling to find food. The company is hiring scabs to maintain operations. "We are positioning third-party resources to support the site during the strike," said Shannon Mutschler, Sysco's public relations officer.

Sysco workers expressed their anger, "I have kids in school. I have [a relative] in the hospital. No one wants these places to be disrupted," a striking worker told Syracuse.com. Stating further, "But enough is enough ... We suffered through the pandemic and worked non-stop, only to be treated unfairly. They made promises that they haven't kept."

Workers have posted comments on social media warning of the role of the Teamsters union. A System Freight Incorporated trucking company (SFI) worker commented, "I was with the 317 teamsters working for SFI out of Solvay [NY]. The Teamsters really didn't do much to help those guys at all. I left because of how bad the contract was. I see Sysco striking (and they should), but I also feel the Teamsters should work to get SFI a much better contract." Another worker warned striking workers of a looming Teamster bureaucracy/Sysco betrayal: "Waste of time. Union will fold after a week or two and side with management. Then tell the members this is the best we can do, just take the offer."

While refusing to openly state their demands, the Teamsters are already working to isolate the strikers

and force them back to work. Sysco is a national corporation, with food warehouses and drivers delivering throughout the United States. Rather than having a national contract, the Teamsters have kept workers at the various warehouses divided and under separate contracts. This way, Sysco can be assured that profits created by workers continue to roll in while it finances its union-busting operations.

The unions have hailed the enactment of a law extending unemployment benefits to strikers that won the backing of Democratic New York Governor Kathy Hochul, who replaced Democrat Andrew Cuomo. It provides weekly unemployment insurance, up to a maximum of \$504, for workers on strike but has onerous conditions, requiring, in most cases, at least 14 days of being out of work before benefits are paid. Additionally, workers may become ineligible if the union provides strike pay. Further, if the company agrees to back pay, New York state may require workers to return unemployment benefits to the state.

Meanwhile, the state of New York announced they would allow private trucking companies to administer the Commercial Driver License (CDL) road test, with Governor Hochul pointing to long waits for CDL road tests at the state Department of Motor Vehicles, which is delaying prospective truck and bus drivers from obtaining their CDL. New York has also expanded the potential pool of drivers by lowering the minimum age to obtain a CDL from 21 to 19.

There are approximately 10,000 Teamsters employed by Sysco, which has other locations where the union bureaucracy is forcing drivers and warehouse workers to work without a contract. The Teamsters have approximately \$300 million in their strike fund accumulated from worker dues, but strike pay is a miserly \$450 per week and is paid out only after the first seven days of the strike.

Meanwhile, Teamster President Sean O'Brien pulls down a six-figure salary of at least the \$341,033 raked in by the former President James P. Hoffa last year.

To avoid a sellout, Sysco workers have to take this fight out of the hands of the Teamster bureaucrats and follow the example of rail, auto, and steel workers and form rank-and-file committees. These committees, democratically run by the members, will be independent of the union bureaucracy and develop a set of demands that meet the needs of the workers and not

the profits of Wall Street. This committee will work to end the isolation of the strikes by uniting with Sysco workers throughout the country.

The WSWS invites workers and truck drivers to fill out the form below telling us about your work conditions and to get more information about forming a rank-and-file committee at your workplace.



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