

“It’s a cycle of misery and low pay”: HarperCollins workers launch indefinite strike for a livable wage

Erik Schreiber
11 November 2022

About 200 workers at the New York City office of HarperCollins, one of the Big Five English-language publishing companies, launched an indefinite strike on Thursday. The workers, who are members of United Auto Workers Local 2110, want wage increases to keep up with surging inflation in what is one of the most expensive cities in the world.

The HarperCollins workers include editors, designers, salespeople and marketing personnel. Their last negotiated contract expired at the end of 2020 and the UAW has extended it for almost two years. During this time, workers have not had any significant raises, even as prices of shelter and staple goods have risen steadily.

Negotiations began in January 2022, and the extended contract expired in April. Workers say that the company, which is owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, is stonewalling and not taking negotiations seriously. Except for a one-day strike on July 20, which workers supported by a margin of 99.5 percent, the United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy has kept workers on the job, allowing the company to beef up its financial war chest and prepare for a strike.

The *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) spoke to several HarperCollins workers on the first day of the strike. Parrish is an editorial assistant but also performs responsibilities related to acquisitions. He has been with the company for a year and estimates that he works on 30 or 40 books per year.

The publishing industry is notorious for underpaying its workers, and Parrish explained that wages at HarperCollins are at the low end of the scale. An entry-level worker at HarperCollins makes \$45,000 per year. A few years ago, HarperCollins paid entry-level workers only \$36,000 per year. “Lots of people have second jobs,” said Parrish. He is considering getting part-time, weekend work at a bookstore to make ends meet. Parrish estimated that his hourly wage at HarperCollins is only a few dollars more than what the bookstore pays. Yet the company claims that workers’ wage demands are “fanciful,” he said.

Another grievance of the HarperCollins workers is that the company does not guarantee a minimum raise. The last time that workers got a raise, it averaged 4 percent. Parrish got a 2

percent raise, which he pointed out was a pay cut, given the level of inflation.

Few workers can afford to live in Manhattan, where their office is located. Parrish lives in Brooklyn. “The HarperCollins workers who live in Manhattan are married to people in finance or tech,” he said. Because so many workers can’t afford to live near the office, they want to continue to work remotely, which they have done during the pandemic. The company is pressuring workers to return to the office, however.

Another reason for working remotely is the ongoing spread of COVID-19, and Parrish emphasized that the pandemic is not over. But HarperCollins has shown indifference to its workers’ safety and apparently has withheld crucial information from them. “Management started wearing masks and didn’t tell us anything. Turns out we had an outbreak,” said Parrish.

The WSWS also spoke to Mireya, an assistant editor who has worked at the company for four years. “HarperCollins has a lot of work to do, in terms of protecting their employees,” she said. She cited the impossibility of living independently on the company’s entry-level wages. “The only reason I took this job was because I’m from New York City,” she said. “I lived with my parents for the first year and a half. We’re at our wit’s end.” She recently got a \$7,000 per year raise and now shares an apartment with her partner.

Mireya also described the company’s rhetoric regarding wages. “They call cost of living adjustments ‘merit raises,’” she said. These raises range from 1 percent to 4 percent. The average is 4 percent, she said, although some workers get as much as 6 percent. “It’s less than the inflation rate,” Mireya pointed out. Moreover, managers can deny workers these raises. “We shouldn’t be at our managers’ mercy,” she said, adding that these raises should be guaranteed for all workers.

Mireya described negotiations as having been drawn out and unproductive. It has been “close to a year of nothing that is acceptable,” in terms of offers from HarperCollins, she said. “We came to the conclusion that they’re not willing to have the conversation.”

Like her coworkers, Mireya described how the company exploits workers’ love of literature. “They take advantage of

the fact that we love our books and we love our authors.” But HarperCollins workers are exhausted, she said. “I’m tired of the phrase ‘That’s the way it is.’” Because of the publishing industry’s low wages, the saying among workers is “Marry rich or come from wealth,” Mireya said.

An assistant editor who has worked at HarperCollins for two years also spoke to the WSWS about working conditions but wished to remain anonymous. “Structural support is not there,” she said. “It’s disorganized from the top down.”

The worker described her experience at the company as a “cycle of misery and low pay.” Not only is pay too low to afford a comfortable retirement, but it also does not even encourage workers to stay at the company, she said. “A lot of people have partners to help them out,” she added, but the workers support each other.

HarperCollins workers can little afford leisure, as well. “I have not had a vacation since the pandemic, and it’s insulting to me when my manager asks me if I’m going to do anything fun,” said the assistant editor.

It is also difficult to advance within the company. “If you’re at a certain level, jobs are created for you because of your experience and because of the people you know,” she said. “If you’re at the lower level, it’s hard to make a lateral move.”

HarperCollins has not been coming to the negotiating table, said the worker. Rather, the human resources department, which the company ironically calls “the People’s Team,” has been canceling meetings or rescheduling them at the last minute. They are not taking negotiations seriously, she confirmed.

Like her coworkers, the assistant editor described how HarperCollins takes advantage of its workers’ selfless dedication to literature. “I like to read. I like to write,” she said, adding that she appreciates the fact that the job stimulates her brain. But this advantage is not sufficient; workers have many other needs. “Passion doesn’t pay,” said the worker. “Unfortunately, wealth does affect my mental health.”

Although HarperCollins is the only publisher with a union, the assistant editor confirmed that workers’ wages were at the low end of the industry scale.

As of this writing, no information about the strike or the union’s demands is available on the website of Local 2110 or on the main UAW website. The UAW bureaucracy’s decision to keep workers on the job for nearly two years after the original contract expired has only helped the company boost its profits. Revenue for HarperCollins was \$1.98 billion in fiscal 2021 and \$2.19 billion in 2022. While the company has prepared for and dug in for a protracted fight, the union bureaucracy has shown no such determination.

On the contrary, the UAW is only paying \$400 a week in strike pay, guaranteeing that workers will soon face serious economic pressure. Rather than providing workers with sufficient resources from the union’s massive strike fund—which is paid for by workers’ dues money—supporters of

incumbent UAW President Ray Curry rescinded a \$100 increase in strike pay at the last UAW Constitutional Convention while voting to increase the salaries of top UAW executives.

Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker from Pennsylvania and socialist candidate for UAW president, has issued two statements in support of the HarperCollins workers and raising awareness of their fight.

In response to the strike, Lehman said, “I fully support the striking HarperCollins workers and call on all UAW members to back their fight for decent wages and working conditions. These workers, along with the CNH workers who have been on strike for more than six months in Wisconsin and Iowa and the 48,000 academic workers who are set to strike at the University of California next week, should be paid strike benefits to fully compensate them for lost income and benefits during the walkout. This will demonstrate to HarperCollins that workers have the resources to conduct a serious battle.

“At the same time, it is urgent that striking workers form their own rank-and-file committees to oversee all negotiations, end the information blackout by the UAW bureaucracy and fight for the demands that workers need, not what the Murdoch-owned publishing company and the UAW bureaucrats claim is affordable. All negotiations should be livestreamed to guarantee the democratic input of the workers whose livelihoods and working conditions will be determined by this contract.

“This struggle is part of the growing revolt of the working class in the US and internationally, including US railroad and dock workers, transit workers in Paris and the UK and many others against the social inequality caused by capitalism and the demands for austerity and war by the Biden administration and other corporate-controlled governments. The HarperCollins workers cannot fight this battle alone. I call on all UAW members and all workers to support this strike.”

HarperCollins workers should contact Lehman at willforuawpresident@gmail.com to discuss the conditions they face and to get assistance in forming a rank-and-file committee. For more information on the campaign of Will Lehman, visit WillforUAWPresident.org.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact