

What kind of company do the striking HarperCollins workers face?

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Workers at book publisher HarperCollins in New York have been on strike for four weeks fighting for wage increases to offset the rise in inflation, better family leave benefits and other improvements. More than 250 editors, designers, salespeople and marketing personnel, members of the United Auto Workers Local 2110, have not had a significant raise since their last negotiated contract first expired in December 2020.

HarperCollins is refusing to budge on its insulting wage offers and workers say negotiations are going nowhere. The intransigence of the company, one of the Big Five English-language publishing companies in the world, is not due to any financial constraints. HarperCollins reported \$2.19 billion in revenue for fiscal 2022, more than a 10 percent increase over the record \$1.98 billion it reported in fiscal 2021.

Like companies in every other industry, HarperCollins seeks to increase its profits still further at the expense of its workers. But each industry, and each company within a given industry, has its particularities that workers must understand. A review of the history, management, ownership and political relationships of HarperCollins is valuable information for the striking workers to advance their struggle.

HarperCollins is a combination of American publisher Harper & Row and the Scottish publisher William Collins, Sons. The multibillion-dollar media company News Corp, owned by Rupert Murdoch, bought and merged the two publishers in 1989. Headquartered in New York, HarperCollins has publishing groups in Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, India, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

The head of HarperCollins is President and CEO Brian Murray. He was appointed CEO in 2008 but has worked at the company since 1997. Murray is a board member and past chair of the Association of American Publishers, a trade association for the book publishing industry. He is a donor to the Democratic Party, which has united with the Republicans to outlaw a strike on the railroads and impose a pro-company contract that workers had rejected.

Murray's previous employer deserves mention. Before joining HarperCollins, Murray was a consultant for Booz Allen Hamilton. This consulting firm has intimate connections to the American government and military that date back at least to the years following World War II. It is linked with the Democratic

and Republican Parties, both of which it supports with financial donations.

Bloomberg once called Booz Allen Hamilton "the world's most profitable spy organization." The firm's own website once stated that among its employees were more than 10,000 people who had passed background checks for top secret security clearance.

As part of its intelligence operations, the company partners with the armed forces and surveillance agencies of foreign states, including Saudi Arabia. The *New York Times* reported that Booz Allen Hamilton has helped Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman consolidate his power. After the barbaric murder of *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi, for which bin Salman is responsible, the firm did not distance itself from bin Salman. Murray's previous association with Booz Allen Hamilton should give HarperCollins workers pause about the cold-blooded manner in which the CEO defends corporate and geopolitical interests.

News Corp, which owns HarperCollins, is a mass media company that reported \$10.39 billion in revenue for fiscal 2022. The company, controlled by Rupert Murdoch and his family, owns Fox News and Dow Jones & Company, which publishes the *Wall Street Journal*—the voice of the financial oligarchy. It also owns News UK, which publishes the right-wing tabloid *The Sun* and the conservative newspaper *The Times*.

Murdoch has a net worth of about \$21.7 billion, making him the 31st richest person in the United States and the 71st richest in the world, according to *Forbes*. Born in Australia, Murdoch began building his empire in the UK and later became a US citizen. For decades, he has used his media holdings to promote his reactionary free-market political agenda, which dovetails with his own financial and business interests. This has led him to support not only conservative capitalist politicians, but also putatively liberal politicians at times.

In the UK, Murdoch was a strong supporter of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who oversaw a sharp turn to the right by British and world politics in the 1980s. He assisted Thatcher's counteroffensive against the working class by attacking the trade unions at the *Times*.

Murdoch also supported the right-wing Prime Minister Tony Blair of the Labour Party. Blair oversaw the UK's participation

in the criminal invasion of Iraq in 2003. A supporter of Brexit, Murdoch had frequent private meetings with David Cameron and backed the vile and buffoonish Boris Johnson, both of whom were Conservative prime ministers.

In the US, Murdoch has supported the presidential candidacies of Democrat Barack Obama, Republican Mitt Romney and Republican Donald Trump. He also has hosted the bloodstained bin Salman for dinner at his Bel Air estate in Los Angeles. In addition, Murdoch is a staunch supporter of the Israeli state, which has long oppressed the Palestinians and functioned as a beach head for US imperialism in the Middle East.

HarperCollins workers can arm themselves for their struggle by recalling the lessons of the 1986 strike of print workers against the Murdoch-owned News International, which is now part of News Corp. At the time, Murdoch wanted to introduce new offset litho technology that would enable journalists at newspapers such as the *Times* to enter copy directly into the printing process. The technology was more efficient than the older hot-metal Linotype method that was then common in the UK, and it threatened 90 percent of News International's print workers with unemployment. Many workers belonged to the National Graphical Association (NGA), which rejected Murdoch's offer of redundancy payments and called a strike.

Murdoch had secretly built a new print shop in the Wapping district of London and equipped it with offset litho technology. When the strike began, Murdoch fired the 6,000 workers and transferred the printing of his four main newspapers to Wapping, where he had hired new employees. The NGA leadership allied itself with the Labour Party and called for a boycott of the four newspapers. The boycott was not successful, and the picketing and protests that the NGA leadership organized did not prevent News International from producing and distributing its newspapers at nearly full capacity. After having strung workers along for 54 weeks, the NGA finally allowed the strike to collapse in a devastating defeat for the print workers. The union had no progressive response to the problem of the new technology. Instead of mobilizing broader sections of workers, it appealed fruitlessly to one of the UK's main capitalist parties.

Corporations seek to use new technologies to slash jobs and increase the profits they pump out of workers. Because it defends the capitalist profit system, the UAW, no more than the NGA, has no answer to defend workers' jobs and living standards. Instead, the UAW bureaucracy has collaborated in the destruction of hundreds of thousands of the jobs in the auto industry, even as the assets of the UAW apparatus have risen through direct payments from the corporations.

HarperCollins executives are citing increased costs of printing, production, freight and distribution to justify its hard line against workers' wage demands. In October, HarperCollins cut jobs in the adult and children divisions and announced a "pause" in hiring, with a company spokesperson

telling the *Bookseller*, "We are taking decisive steps to operate as efficiently as possible."

Yet increased book sales during the pandemic have allowed the company to reap big profits. Earlier predictions that ebooks would dampen demand for print books have proven inaccurate. Print sales still remain strong, and publishing is still a highly profitable industry, according to *Forbes*. This puts HarperCollins workers in a favorable position.

At the same time, a class action lawsuit was filed in January alleging that the Big Five publishers—Hachette Book Group, HarperCollins Publishers, Macmillan Publishing Group, Simon & Schuster and Penguin Random House—have been engaged in a price-fixing conspiracy with Amazon to prevent competition and artificially inflate the price of e-books.

In other words, HarperCollins workers are squaring up against a giant transnational corporation with extensive corporate and political ties to capitalist governments in the US, the UK and elsewhere. It is indeed a powerful enemy. But HarperCollins workers have potentially stronger allies: the millions of workers coming into struggle against inequality in the US and internationally. This includes 120,000 railroad workers, more than 50,000 striking academic workers at the University of California and The New School, newsroom workers at the *New York Times* and the tens of thousands of New York City municipal employees.

To unite with these workers, HarperCollins workers must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the UAW bureaucracy, which is doing everything to isolate the strike and starve workers into submission with poverty-level strike benefits.

It is urgent that workers form a rank-and-file strike committee, democratically controlled by workers themselves, to outline their demands and develop a strategy to fight for it. This committee should demand that all negotiations are livestreamed and that no contract is accepted unless it fulfills all the demands of workers for inflation-busting raises, cost-of-living protection and family leave.

At the same time, the publishing industry cannot be left in the hands of billionaires. It must be transformed into a public utility democratically controlled and collectively owned by workers themselves, in order to provide affordable reading material and a good standard of living to all workers.



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