

UAW prepares betrayal of HarperCollins strike by entering mediation

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The strike of about 250 workers at the major New York-based publishing company HarperCollins has reached a critical point. Last week, United Auto Workers Local 2110 agreed to enter federal mediation with HarperCollins. This move signals the union's determination to end the strike quickly on the company's terms.

For close to three months, these workers have been striking for higher salaries in an industry that is notorious for low pay. The striking HarperCollins workers include editorial assistants, marketers, salespeople, publicity workers, designers and legal professionals. They are demanding that the company increase the starting annual salary from \$45,000 to \$50,000, which is comparable to what the other major New York publishers pay.

HarperCollins, which has reported billions of dollars in revenue during the past two years, has refused to negotiate. Showing utter contempt for its workers, the company has not spoken to them since before the strike began in November. HarperCollins is the second-largest trade publisher in the United States and one of the Big Five English-language publishers in the world. The company reported \$2.19 billion in revenue for fiscal 2022, which represented a more than 10 percent increase over the record \$1.98 billion it reported in fiscal 2021.

The UAW union has done nothing to strengthen its members' position or wage an aggressive fight for their just demands. Rather than mobilizing other UAW members or appealing to other publishing workers, the union has organized futile protests at HarperCollins headquarters and at the headquarters of the publisher's parent company. Although the UAW's strike fund is worth as much as \$826 million, it is giving workers only \$400 per week in strike pay, which is shamefully

inadequate in one of the country's most expensive cities. The UAW is pursuing its time-honored strategy of wearing workers down and demoralizing them.

The UAW will use the mediation process as a cover for claiming that workers have no alternative but to make concessions that they otherwise would have rejected. Preventing this defeat will require the HarperCollins workers breaking from the union apparatus that is attempting to betray them. By forming a rank-and-file committee that the workers themselves control democratically, they can break the isolation that the UAW has imposed on them and wage a successful fight.

The workers' last negotiated contract expired in December 2020. Instead of calling a strike, the UAW extended the contract until April 2022. It thus allowed workers' real wages to decline as inflation soared and the cost of living rose. Workers demonstrated their growing anger when they voted by 99.5 percent to approve a strike. This pressure from the membership forced the union to call a one-day strike in July 2022 and, finally, to begin an indefinite strike on November 10, 2022.

On January 18, Local 2110 brought the picket line to the headquarters of News Corporation, which owns HarperCollins, focusing workers' attention on fruitless appeals to shareholders and its ultra-right chairman Rupert Murdoch. The union arranged this stunt not to deal a blow to the company, but to vent workers' frustration over the lack of progress throughout their strike. For the same reasons, Local 2110 is planning a rally at HarperCollins headquarters on January 31 and another rally outside News Corporation on February 2.

The UAW has done everything possible to isolate and weaken the HarperCollins strike since it began. They have largely confined the picket line to a side street that

is often in the shadows of the adjacent buildings. Moreover, neither Local 2110 nor the UAW has published a word about the strike on their websites. This news blackout reflects the desire of the union's notoriously corrupt bureaucracy to divide the striking HarperCollins workers from other UAW members.

In its tweets announcing that it would enter federal mediation with HarperCollins, Local 2110 claimed that this development showed that "our pressure campaign is working." But this assessment is hard to square with the fact that the company has not even talked with the union since before the strike began.

The federal government, which intervened last year to block a strike by 120,000 railroaders and impose a pro-corporate contract, is not a neutral arbiter but the defender of the corporate and financial oligarchy. Under the aegis of a federal mediator (whose identity has not been revealed as of this writing), the UAW will make concessions to achieve a "fair" and "reasonable" agreement that satisfies HarperCollins at workers' expense. With this contract in hand, union officials will argue that conditions in the industry do not allow the company to pay workers a living wage and that they have achieved the best deal possible under the circumstances.

The UAW has followed this playbook many times to impose sellout contracts with below-inflation raises on workers. It used this tactic in November 2021 to betray student workers at Columbia University who were fighting for their first contract. It used it again in December 2022 to subordinate the interests of part-time faculty members at the New School to those of the administration. The high salaries and privileges of the UAW bureaucrats depend on their ability to provide such services to the companies with which they supposedly negotiate. The unions are not advocates for workers but adjuncts of management.

The HarperCollins workers must not allow the UAW to betray them as it has betrayed so many other members. Workers must take control of the strike by forming a rank-and-file committee that is independent of the union and of both capitalist parties.

The struggle must continue, and its goal must be to win what workers need, not to settle for what the company and the union say is "reasonable." The HarperCollins workers can strengthen their position by reaching out to other UAW members (regardless of the

industry in which they work), other publishing professionals, and to the broader working class for support. Their strike must be linked consciously to the broader counteroffensive that the international working class is waging against attacks on its living standards and democratic rights.



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