California drivers and warehouse workers join strikes against Sysco in Indiana and Kentucky

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As of Thursday, over 1,000 drivers and warehouse workers have gone on strike against the giant food distribution monopoly Sysco in Indiana, Kentucky and California.

Following a walkout of more than 300 workers in Indianapolis, Indiana and Louisville, Kentucky on March 27, another 700 Sysco employees set up picket lines in Southern California on Thursday to demand higher wages, improved health care benefits and an end to excessive overtime at the $40 billion dollar corporation based in Houston, Texas.

According to a press release by the Teamsters, the Sysco strike was extended to three locals in the Los Angeles area on Thursday with "more extensions expected to go up as early as tonight."

A report by WTWO, the ABC affiliate in Indianapolis, said on Wednesday that the Sysco workers, members of Teamsters Local 135, voted unanimously on March 12 for strike action after a previous contract expired on March 3 and no new agreement was forthcoming.

In response, Sysco issued a statement saying the company intended to break the strike in Indianapolis by implementing "contingency plans to quickly ramp up operations to serve our customers …" The company, which has forced employees to work 16-hour shifts and drive unsafe and overpacked vehicles, then blamed the workers for disrupting deliveries "to hospitals, nursing homes, schools and local small businesses."

In Louisville, about 100 workers went on strike and walked picket lines outside the Sysco facility in Fairdale. A report by WDRB spoke to Michael Bonner, a driver for Sysco for the last 17 years who said, "We're out here standing up for each other."

A statement from the company said that a contingency plan has been implemented "to quickly ramp up operations," also attacking the workers for disrupting food distribution to hospitals and schools.

However, a spokesperson from Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS), which includes sections of Louisville and serves 100,000 students in the area, said there was no immediate risk to school lunches. According to JCPS spokesperson Carolyn Callahan, the district received all of their orders last week and, "Students will not go without food."

A statement issued by the Teamsters leadership said that the strikes in Indianapolis and Louisville are the product of "unfair labor practices (ULPs) after weeks of contentious contract negotiations at both locations."

The Teamsters bureaucracy is seeking to prevent the struggle of the 70,000 workers at Sysco from becoming a nationwide walkout. This is completely in line with what the union has done over the past six months by keeping the different locations of Sysco workers isolated from one another and signing separate contract agreements with each statewide entity of the corporation.

In September and October of last year, hundreds of Sysco workers in New York and Boston were called out on strike by the Teamsters over similar unfair labor practice charges. As the WSWS pointed out at the time, the declaration of unfair labor practice charges was used by the union to ensure that the strike could be called off without any contract actually being negotiated or any vote of the membership to adopt a new agreement.

The Teamsters union has approximately 10,000 workers at the world's largest broadline food

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distribution company. The global company has 600,000 customers worldwide and operates 330 distribution facilities in a total of 90 countries.

Sysco workers in California, Kentucky and Indiana face a similar fate as their fellow workers in New York and Massachusetts unless workers themselves change the course of the struggle. As we explained last October , “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.”

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