

Teamsters bureaucracy offers hot air to UPS workers at contract rallies

Tom Hall
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With the official start of contract talks at UPS less than two weeks away, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters is holding a series of “solidarity” rallies around the country. These are indication of serious concern by the union bureaucracy, which has spent decades giving up one concession after another, that it could lose control of a restive and angry rank and file.

Workers are seething after the bitter experience of the 2018 contract fight. The Teamsters imposed the deal, which included major concessions, by using an arcane constitutional clause to bypass a majority “no” vote. Over the last three years, they have been forced to work through a pandemic and the highest rate of inflation in decades.

UPS is the largest unionized company in the US, with over 350,000 Teamsters members. It is also among the most heavily exploited workforces, with two-thirds working part time and starting out at little more than \$15 per hour, comparable to or even less than fast-food wages in many areas of the country. The pay rates “negotiated” by the union apparatus are so low that even local management in different areas of the country are compelled to increase wages beyond the contractual level, called “market rate adjustments,” to attract enough workers.

The Teamsters bureaucracy has spent years preparing for the inevitable eruption of rank-and-file opposition in this round of contract talks by elevating a fake “dissident” section within the bureaucracy itself to the union’s leadership. In 2021, Sean O’Brien came to power in an election with the lowest turnout of any direct elections in the history of the Teamsters, to replace former president James Hoffa Jr. O’Brien was a long-standing attack dog for Hoffa until shortly before he announced his own candidacy.

The Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), the faction of the union bureaucracy promoted by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left organizations, played a critical role in whitewashing O’Brien’s record and presenting him as an energetic reformer. In exchange, much of the TDU’s leadership has been elevated into national positions.

On Sunday, O’Brien and General Secretary-Treasurer Fred Zuckerman appeared at a contract rally in Boston, capping off a week of parking lot rallies at various UPS facilities organized with the help of the TDU. In spite of the fact that Boston is

O’Brien’s base of power, only 500 out of more than 10,000 Teamsters in the region attended the rally, which lasted for less than a half-hour.

The speeches by O’Brien, Zuckerman and other union officials were blasts of hot air, long on promises which they have no intention of keeping. “We are going to set the tone for organized labor ... moving forward,” O’Brien declared. “We are not afraid to do it [to strike],” he claimed, if UPS did not agree to get rid of second-tier delivery drivers, substantially increase wages for part-timers and other demands.

Zuckerman told the crowd, “If we don’t have the contract that you guys want by August 1, we’re not working anymore.” He also pledged to “spend every penny” of the union’s \$300 million strike fund in support of a strike.

The “promise” to strike if a deal is not in place by the expiration date only underscores that they intend to get a deal done well in advance of the deadline to pre-empt a strike. Industry consultant Satish Jindel has predicted a deal will get done by the end of June, and that there was “no chance” of a strike, according to an article in *Freightwaves*.

“Most analysts, including Jindel, believe that in the current market environment, the stakes are too high and everyone has too much to lose for the Teamsters to strike,” the industry outlet said. In other words, the ruling class can neither afford nor accept the uncontrolled growth of opposition in the working class, not only because this will threaten to upend the stock market but also the plans to mobilize for direct US conflict with Russia and China.

The situation at UPS cannot be separated from the policy of the Biden administration to utilize the union bureaucracy to prevent strikes and suppress wage growth. While wages in general have failed to keep up with record inflation, wage growth over the past two years has been even *lower* for unionized workers when compared to nonunion workers, at 3.9 versus 5.3 percent.

For the past year, the US Federal Reserve has been raising interest rates in order to deliberately drive up unemployment and curb wage growth. This has encountered serious difficulties, however, because the financial system is totally dependent upon virtually free money from the government. This makes the bureaucracy’s role in limiting wage growth

through sellouts all the more critical.

Admitting more than he perhaps intended, Zuckerman cited last year's contract for 3,000 car haulers in the auto industry as a model to be emulated at UPS. That contract, however, was a sellout which included below-inflation wage increases of 9, 5 and 4 percent over three years, with cost-of-living increases capped at 50 cents a year. The contract also retained the hated "Article 22" clause which allows the carriers to pay union drivers half-rate for jobs that were recently done by nonunion labor, essentially trading massive concessions on wages in exchange for allowing the union to expand its dues base.

Significantly, the deal was announced at the 11th hour before a May 31 strike deadline. There can be no doubt that the Teamsters officials have a similar maneuver in store at UPS.

In the event that a strike is imminent despite the best efforts of the bureaucracy, Congress's ban on a rail strike last December shows that the government will not hesitate to use direct state repression against the workers. O'Brien himself was directly involved in negotiations with the White House on rail because two of the three largest rail unions are subsidiaries of the Teamsters. In the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen convention last fall, O'Brien attacked rank-and-file opposition from railroaders, arrogantly instructing them to keep their criticisms "at the dinner table."

Indeed, *Freightwaves* published another comment last week pointing out that the US Postal Service will likely be used as strikebreakers, as it was in the last UPS strike in 1997. The "Postal Service, with an astonishing capacity of 60 million daily parcels and with more excess space than the number of parcels UPS moves each day, is being viewed as the 'white knight,'" *Freightwaves* says.

The central question which UPS workers face, therefore, is how to leverage their immense strength, both in numbers and in their central position in the global supply chain, together with the immense support for any strike within the working class as a whole, to break the corporate-government-union bureaucracy conspiracy against them.

The TDU is playing an increasingly central role in the plans of the Teamsters officialdom to disrupt and disorient rank-and-file opposition to prevent it from reaching that point. The Sunday before the Boston rally, the TDU held an online meeting, "Get Ready for April Contract Actions." The meeting chair introduced the TDU as a "grassroots campaign of Teamster members" which was "independent of the IBT," but this was immediately contradicted by the next speaker, who was Sean O'Brien. In fact, almost all of the speakers were union bureaucrats.

The critical issues were buried at the meeting. Almost nothing happening outside of UPS, or even the history at UPS itself, were addressed, and instead the meeting centered on technical issues behind organizing parking lot rallies. But a significant exchange came late in the meeting, when a worker asked from the floor: Might the government step in and stop a strike like

they did with freight rail? And what would the union do in that situation?

In response, TDU Steering Committee member Sean Williams claimed that the situation at UPS was totally different from rail because the railroads are governed by the Railway Labor Act. Therefore, he claimed, there was no chance of a similar state intervention against a UPS strike. This is a lie. While the UPS workers may not be under the RLA, the government has still given itself broad powers to ban strikes under the Taft-Hartly Act, which has been used repeatedly since it was first passed after World War II. Williams pointed to Clinton's decision not to issue an injunction in the 1997 UPS strike as proof that, if workers "stand united," the government will not seek to intervene.

As a matter of fact, a Taft-Hartley injunction was being seriously considered by the Clinton administration towards the end of the strike, until then-union president Ron Carey saved him the trouble by shutting the strike down. Carey, like O'Brien, was elected with the key support of the TDU. He also had close ties to the Democratic Party, and his opponents in the bureaucracy used revelations that he had been fencing union funds into his own reelection campaign, via the Democratic National Committee and AFL-CIO Executive Board, to expel him and replace him with Hoffa.

This self-serving account of the 1997 strike is designed to conceal from UPS workers that they are in a fight not only against management, but against the capitalist state. These are serious enemies, which workers can defeat only by knowing how to mobilize their own strength independently. This is why the *World Socialist Web Site* urges workers to take the initiative out of the hands of the Teamsters apparatus by forming rank-and-file committees, which would transfer decision-making power from the union apparatus to workers themselves. This must be combined with an appeal for the broadest possible support in the working class as a whole, including at competitors such as USPS and Fedex. This is precisely what the TDU and the Teamsters are trying to prevent.



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