

# Teamsters union shuts down expanding strike at Sysco in advance of UPS contract talks

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On Monday, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters moved to block the development of a national Sysco strike, announcing that workers at the Indianapolis, Indiana, and Louisville, Kentucky, locations of the wholesale food distribution corporation had ended their two-week walkout and ratified “record-breaking contracts.”

In a press statement, the union claimed that the 260 Sysco drivers and warehouse workers at the two locations had “won big” by “securing higher wages and better retirement benefits.”

However, the limited details about the five-year contracts the Teamsters leadership signed with Sysco do not show a successful or victorious end to the strike as stated by the union. Rather, the wage increase across the life of the five-year deal amounts to a total of 23 percent for workers in Indianapolis.

With inflation currently at 6 percent annually, the net result of the wages would leave workers with a substantial wage cut. Given the fact that the 23 percent increase barely covers the impact of surging inflation over the past two years, ongoing record inflation will put the drivers and warehouse workers in a worse position in five years than they are in today.

As for “better benefits,” the union gave little details other than to say the contract contained “excellent retirement benefits, affordable union health care, strong workplace improvements, and MLK Day as a paid holiday.” Given the long record of betrayals by the Teamsters bureaucracy of the struggles of rank-and-file members, the use of superlatives by the union cannot be taken as good coin.

The outbreak of a series of strike across the country by Sysco workers prompted the intervention of Teamsters General President Sean O’Brien. The top bureaucrat came out of his office and got directly

involved in shutting down the sympathy pickets set up by Sysco workers in Los Angeles and San Francisco, California; Bloomington, Indiana; and Seattle, Washington, that brought out more than 1,000 workers on strike.

The timing of the union’s announcement of the sellout agreements to end the strikes is unmistakably connected with the pending national contract negotiations between the Teamsters and United Parcel Service (UPS) that are scheduled to begin on Monday, April 17. Pressure is building among the 340,000 Teamsters union members at UPS for a nationwide strike action against one of the largest employers in the country.

UPS is the world’s largest shipping courier by revenue which took in more than \$100 billion in 2022 and earned an operating profit of \$13.1 billion. UPS workers are seething after the bitter experience of the concessionary contract negotiated by the union and then forced through by the Teamsters apparatus against the majority “no” vote of the workers.

A confrontation between hundreds of thousands of UPS workers and the Teamsters union bureaucracy is on the agenda, and the bureaucrats around O’Brien do not want to be distracted by a nationwide strike at Sysco. Meanwhile, as the walkouts by Sysco workers were spreading across the country, the Teamsters leadership is also concerned that the militancy of the food distribution workers would likely expand into UPS locations and spiral out of their control.

Another factor in the intervention of O’Brien to shut down the movement of Sysco workers was the fact that the Seattle office of Sysco filed a lawsuit against the union on April 4 for more than \$2 million in damages, claiming that the sympathy strike by drivers and warehouse workers in support of the walkouts in

Indiana and Kentucky was illegal.

The Indiana and Kentucky Sysco workers walked out on March 30 to demand an end to excessive overtime, for a livable wages and improved health care benefits at the \$40 billion multinational food distribution monopoly based in Houston, Texas.

Workers at the Louisville, Kentucky, location reported that Sysco hired scabs to break the strike and paid the drivers \$45 per hour to become replacement workers when the drivers on the picket lines were typically earning \$21 per hour.

The Teamsters pushed their narrative of the sellout on social media with posts that called the end of the strike a “victory” and a “triumph.” Of course, the union never explained why they settled similar sellout agreements in Massachusetts and New York last fall and blocked a nationwide mobilization of all 11,500 members against Sysco.

Workers who took the initiative to mobilize other sections of Sysco employees in sympathy walkouts to support strikers in Indiana and Kentucky took an important step forward in unifying the struggle of all workers against the employers. However, like workers in every industry who are members of official unions, Sysco workers need independent rank-and-file committees that will place the conduct of struggle against the employers into the hands of the most trusted workers and out of the hands of the pro-corporate labor bureaucracy.

The organization of rank-and-file committees aimed against the companies and their union stooges is the only way workers can fight for their own interests and unify the strength of the entire working class against the capitalist system.



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