

# As Teamsters and UPS begin negotiations, union president O'Brien claims that Biden "did not intercede" to ban rail strike

Kimie Saito, Tom Hall  
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*Work at UPS? Tell us what you think about the start of contract talks by filling out the form below. All submissions will remain anonymous.*

Contract talks begin today between the United Parcel Service (UPS) and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) in Washington D.C. The Teamsters' UPS contract is the largest private sector collective bargaining agreement in North America, covering 340,000 workers in 176 union locals across the country. The current five-year agreement expires on July 31, 2023.

Last year, UPS recorded a record \$13 billion in profits off of a record \$100 billion in revenue, \$5 billion of which went to top executives and shareholders in stock buybacks. Meanwhile, UPS workers are one of the most exploited workforces in the country, with two-thirds working part-time and starting out at as little as \$15.50 an hour, comparable to or less than many fast-food restaurants. Wages under the existing Teamsters contract is so low that management in some locations have had to raise starting pay to attract sufficient numbers of workers, in what are called "market rate adjustments."

On Saturday, April 15, Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien, UPS Teamsters, addressed a parking lot rally at Local 952 in Orange, California. Only about 500 workers showed up, including those that were brought in by two school buses, out of tens of thousands of rank-and-file members throughout the Southern California region.

The poor turnout reflected the lack of confidence among rank-and-file UPS workers in the Teamster bureaucracy, in spite of its attempts to strike a "militant" pose under O'Brien. While the union has centered much of its public statements around its claims that it will call a strike if no contract is in place by July 31, workers have not forgotten the way the bureaucracy "ratified" the 2018 contract even after a majority of workers voted it down.

A number of Democratic politicians, such as Katie Porter, and other AFL-CIO regional bureaucrats were paraded at the rally to pledge their meaningless solidarity with the workers.

"There are 12 weeks from Monday until the expiration of the contract. We've stated our intentions. Teamsters will not be

working beyond the expiration date of that contract unless there is a new contract that our members deserve, endorse, embrace and vote on," O'Brien declared. "This company has made record profits because of the hard work of Teamsters, and now it's time for UPS to reward the people who make this company a success."

O'Brien made promises to fight for better pay for all workers, eliminate the hated two-tier wage 22.4 job classification, increase the number of full-time jobs, improve job security, end excessive overtime, and address safety and health concerns. "We are one family," he said, promising to unite together the large numbers of part-time workers with the full-time drivers. But to better increase the profitability of the company, the union bureaucracy helped to create these divisions within the workforce all the way back in the 1970s.

"This is how important this contract is," O'Brien continued. "I had a White House briefing this past week. And I had to talk to a bunch of different people in the White House about what the potential is if there's a strike. I said, 'You think supply chain solutions stopped during the pandemic? I will make certain supply chain stops during THIS pandemic, meaning the pandemic of UPS providing us with the best contract. There is no vaccination for what we're gonna do to them. ... There's a lot of concern.

"But I want to tell you this because our brothers and sisters in the rail division, they felt that the administration interceded, *which isn't the truth* [emphasis added]. Anyways, I told the White House, if it gets bad, if it gets nasty, if we got to take it to the streets ... I grew up in a tough neighborhood in Boston. We had a code of honor. If two people are fighting in the street and you have nothing to do with it, you keep walking."

O'Brien's claim that the Biden administration did not intervene in the railroad struggle last year is a bald-faced lie which insults the intelligence of the rank and file. Biden intervened directly in September, shortly before the expiration of legal restrictions on the right to strike for 120,000 railroaders, to broker a sellout deal to avert a strike.

O'Brien knows this because he was in those meetings. He admitted this in a speech to the convention of the Brotherhood

of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen, which is part of the Teamsters, last October. In that speech, O'Brien also arrogantly spoke out against rank-and-file opposition to the unions' betrayals by instructing workers to keep their criticism "at the dinner table." This was no doubt in reference to the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which was playing the lead role in organizing opposition to betrayals of the union bureaucracy.

When workers in many of the biggest unions voted to reject this deal, while the rail union bureaucrats stalled for time, Biden then went to Congress to request they pass legislation banning a strike and imposing his contract, which quickly passed along bipartisan lines, including with the support of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and two other members of the Democratic Socialists of America. O'Brien barely raised a peep about this attack by the capitalist state on the fundamental democratic rights of Teamster members.

As for O'Brien's account of his most recent meeting with Biden, this is nonsense which cannot be taken seriously. In reality, his lying about the actual record of the railroad struggle, while claiming that Biden will remain "neutral" in the current contract, is the surest sign that what they actually discussed was how to carry out the exact same thing at UPS.

The Biden administration, which is shoveling trillions to prop up the banks and to expand the war in Ukraine and prepare for a new one involving US troops in China, cannot stand by if more than 300,000 UPS workers walk out because it would threaten to spark a mass movement of the American working class similar to what is already happening in Britain, France, Sri Lanka and other countries where millions have taken to the streets.

It would embolden in particular more than 100,000 autoworkers whose contracts expire in mid-September as well as 22,000 dockworkers on the West Coast, who have been kept on the job without a contract since last summer. A series of work stoppages at ports in Southern California show that it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep the dockworkers reined in.

Since taking office, Biden's preferred strategy has been to disguise what are, for all intents and purpose, government strike bans by working through his proxies in the union bureaucracy, who help to block strikes and ram through substandard contracts. But the rejection of the rail contract last year amid a rebellion by the rank and file prompted Washington to intervene nakedly, showing that this strategy is being seriously challenged. All sides are deeply nervous about the possibility of an intervention by the rank and file at UPS even more powerful than what occurred in the railroads.

In a sign of concern that Teamster officials not needlessly fan the flames of anger in the rank and file, O'Brien issued an internal memo last Thursday to all international union staff regarding social media posting during contract negotiations. It said, "International Union staff should refrain from posting

personal attacks against UPS leadership or employees on all social media platforms."

O'Brien and the White House intend to rely heavily on pseudo-left forces such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) faction within the IBT to try to disrupt and disorient opposition from the rank and file.

Ten years ago, O'Brien threatened physical violence against TDU campaigners backing candidates against the James Hoffa Jr. faction of the apparatus, of which O'Brien himself was a top lieutenant. Indeed, his gangster-like references to "the Boston way" and "street fights" in the weekend's speech served as apt descriptions of the type of response meted out to his opponents when he was head of Joint Council 10 in New England. Now he has brought TDU into top responsible positions in the IBT staff and relies heavily on them to bolster his newfound reputation as a "militant."

However, these forces have also been compromised by their role in the ban of a strike in the rail industry. In a recent interview in *Jacobin* magazine, the de facto house organ of the DSA, Ocasio-Cortez justified her vote in favor of imposing the contract by claiming that she was advised to do so by Railroad Workers United (RWU), the TDU's sister organization in the rail industry. This prompted a rapid response by RWU leader Ron Kaminkow a few days later in *Jacobin*, claiming that she was "confused" and that RWU never supported a strike ban.

But whatever the case may be, RWU has helped to whitewash the record of the Democratic Party and the union bureaucracy. Indeed, in the same reply, Kaminkow disingenuously claimed that RWU had supported a vote in Congress to add seven days of paid sick leave to the contract which Congress was voting to impose. That, however, was only the fig leaf—which they knew would never pass the Senate and structured the vote to make sure that its defeat there would not delay a strike ban—which the Democrats used to give themselves cover.

UPS workers must prepare themselves for a battle not only against management, but against the White House and the pro-company union bureaucrats. This means organizing themselves into rank-and-file committees to provide the means for democratic discussion and independent decision-making and joint actions to defeat the sellout which is being prepared.



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