

“The union heads are making deals behind our backs with the carriers”

UPS workers speak out against dire working conditions as contract talks begin

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UPS workers: tell us what you think about the start of contract talks by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Official negotiations between United Parcel Service (UPS) and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) kicked off this week in Washington D.C. The contract for more than 340,000 UPS workers expires on July 31. UPS workers are some of the most exploited in the country. Over 65 percent of the workforce are part-time, with many making as low as \$15.50 per hour, while revenues for the logistics giant topped \$100 billion last year for the first time.

At a Teamsters rally in Orange County, California this weekend, Teamsters President Sean O'Brien lied to the rally, claiming that the Biden administration “did not intercede” to ban the rail strike last year and force through a contract rail workers overwhelmingly hated. This is a clear sign that O'Brien and his team of bureaucrats are working to force through a sellout deal and avoid a strike.

A team of reporters with the *World Socialist Web Site* talked to UPS workers at the event who spoke out against dire working conditions, impacts of the financial crisis and rising cost of living, and their thoughts on the contract negotiations. We have changed their names to protect their identities.

Michael, a full-time driver with 30 years at UPS, said: “They [management] monitor how much time we spend at each stop, if they are seeing one minute, one minute, one minute and they see ten minutes they start questioning you. You can't even use the bathroom without getting harassed or sometimes customers have issues and want to ask you for help.”

Speaking of the union rallies held across the US over the past week leading up to contract talks, Michael said,

“Today's rally is just the Teamsters trying to get us on their side, they say ‘we're all family.’ But we aren't. The union heads are making deals behind our backs with the carriers.”

Michael said what is needed in this contract is for pensions to be secured, air conditioning for all the trucks, and an end to the tier system. “The carriers take advantage of these young guys who are new and are taking what they can get, but what they don't realize is they need to fight for the things that matter—health care, pensions, and retirement in addition to wages.

Jorge, a full-time driver, said, “This contract has to focus more on the part-timers and we need more full-time positions.” He said it took him many years to be a full-time driver. “As a part-time worker, I acquired a lot of debt. I was only making \$18,000 a year tops, and this was very hard to afford cost of living so I had to rely on credit cards. I'm glad to be full-time now, but the cost of living has only gotten worse and inflation is not waiting on us.

“Things can get really hot in the summer. There were a few days where it hit 109 degrees outside and the back of my truck got up to 130-140 degrees. Every time you open the back door you get hit with a wall of heat, all day long. A lot of guys leave and I don't blame them. As a part-time worker, you make a wage that is borderline what you would make at In-N-Out [a burger chain], but without all the heavy lifting, the heat, and the abuse. They called us part-time but you're actually working 60-70 hours sometimes.”

In late June 2022, Esteban Chavez, Jr., a 24-year-old delivery driver in Southern California, collapsed and died of suspected heat stroke while doing deliveries. In 2021, Jose Rodriguez, 23, was found dead from heat exhaustion at the end of his shift, as reported in the *New York Times*.

Despite frequent heat stroke incidents and demands from workers that the company create safer working conditions, UPS company trucks remain without air-conditioning.

Maria, a part-time UPS worker, said, “I have been there for 15 years, and it took me 15 years to get to \$24 an hour. We have a lot of newcomers coming in, and they’re not too far from us. But the thing is the company demands so much. They expect us to meet a certain number and work with less people. And when they cut people, some of the supervisors jump in and start doing the work, which takes work away from us.”

“And not only that, it gets really, really hot in there,” she said. “Not all the positions I work in have fans, and if we take off to get water, they get upset and tell us you’re supposed to do that on your break. I feel like they play favorites with some workers. The people that work the hardest get treated worse, they come down hard on the workers who are out sick, but the ones who are slacking they are like, ‘whatever.’”

On the low wages at UPS, she said, “It’s hard because it doesn’t meet today’s economy. I’m hoping for a higher wage because I’m only part-time. I’ve been trying to get a full-time job within the company. I’ve been trying to get a combo for the past two years. If you’ve been there 10 years or less, you probably won’t get a full-time job for another 10 years.”

Maria continued, “So since I’ve been there for 15 years, I’m hoping by next year I’ll get a full-time job. I heard they are taking away full-time positions and making part-time positions when those used to be combo positions. They are two different jobs, two different shifts and they combine them into one job, but I’m hearing they are taking away those combos and making them part-time.”

“I feel like an increase of \$5 would help. I’m only part-time, I’m a mother of three kids, and I’m also married, so it’s hard. I don’t qualify for government aid. You’d have to be making nothing.”

The sweltering heat during the summers is especially dangerous. She said, “In the summertime they try to provide more water. We need more fans and water stations around us that will help and to be able to get water when we need it. I feel like the drivers need it the most. They’re out there running and hustling, and inside the truck it’s super hot. It’s like 20 degrees hotter than what it’s outside.

“Actually, in our building we had somebody pass away in the Pasadena center. He was only 24 years old. Yes, I think he was Esteban Chavez. It’s dangerous when it’s

raining too, because the driver has to run across the street and people don’t see you, they [UPS] say take it slow. There were four drivers from our warehouse that passed away from COVID too.”

The 2018 contract betrayal the Teamsters imposed on parcel workers is still at the forefront of everyone’s minds. In October 2018, the Teamsters and UPS forced through a concessions contract despite the fact that over 54 percent of voters rejected the contract. One month later, Teamsters and UPS announced another sellout deal covering over 11,000 UPS freight workers after working to isolate and intimidate workers into voting “yes” for their respective contracts.

About the 2018 contract, she said, “We worked through it. It was up and we were like, are we going to strike? And then the president at the time [James P. Hoffa] said no, we’re going to keep working and then we’ll give you the retro pay. I didn’t like that he kept us working. We should have all been united.

“If UPS doesn’t give us what we deserve, we’re going to strike, and I’m ready to strike with my brothers and sisters. I’m not trying to be rich or fancy,” said Maria, “I just want to live a healthy normal life.”

On the Biden administration’s spending on war, she said, “I think it’s wrong. We’re giving too much money to Ukraine and a lot of other countries ... we need it here. We have our own war. We have a homeless epidemic. We have a lot of families that can barely put food on their tables. I feel like it’s wrong we’re wasting on all these military projects, on secret projects that we don’t even know about. We don’t need any more enemies, and the dollar is being wiped out.”



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