

# Teamsters negotiators violate their own pledge not to start national talks at UPS until after supplemental deals

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10 May 2023

*UPS workers: What do you think about the decision to start national contract talks before the supplementals have been finished? Tell us by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.*

With less than three months left before the contract for 340,000 UPS truck drivers expires, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters has announced that it has begun negotiations on a national contract with logistics giant UPS, despite the fact that two regional supplemental agreements remain unresolved.

The 40 regional supplemental agreements have a significant impact on working conditions and can vary considerably from region to region. The two outstanding supplemental agreements are for the Local 89 Air Rider in Louisville, Kentucky, where the company's massive Worldport air hub is located, and in Sacramento and Northern California. Local 89, significantly, is the former local of current General Secretary-Treasurer Fred Zuckerman.

For months, the Teamsters bureaucracy under General President Sean O'Brien has pledged that it would not start bargaining for a new national contract until UPS "gets its act together" and finishes negotiating all 40 local and regional supplementals. This is the reverse of how talks at UPS developed in 2018, with supplemental talks only following the national contract. That contract was also "ratified" by the previous administration of James Hoffa, Jr. in spite of a majority vote against it by the rank and file, drawing outrage which has only continued to mount since then.

O'Brien has billed this as a tactical masterstroke designed to put UPS management on the defensive. Responding to workers' anger, the union officialdom has also repeatedly pledged to strike UPS if a deal is not in place by July 31, when the current contract expires.

However, on Tuesday, May 9, the Teamsters suddenly reneged on its pledges and initiated national negotiations with UPS, behind the backs of the rank and file.

Other than sparsely detailed social media posts and updates on corporate-owned news outlets, no information has been given to workers. No official press release from the Teamsters union has been issued so far, leaving rank-and-file members in the dark concerning this decision that was bureaucratically decided without their input.

The Teamsters leadership has tried to defend its capitulation through online social media posts.

"As proposals were exchanged with the company, the Teamsters' national committee warned UPS that national talks can and will be shut down if deals are not successfully reached in Louisville and Sacramento," O'Brien said.

"What's most critical about these early hours of national negotiations is that big gains are already being made and the Teamsters have made zero concessions to get them," added Teamsters General Secretary-Treasurer Fred Zuckerman in the same post.

The most revealing statement was made by O'Brien on Twitter. "Our Local 89 & NorCal Supplemental [bargaining] Chairs urged the Nat'l [bargaining] Committee to begin negotiations. They understand we have lots of work to do & little time to do it. Unlike @UPS, they want to keep this process moving. And doing so maintains our momentum."

This is the opposite of how they have portrayed negotiations up until now. O'Brien does not explain why UPS would have an incentive to stall, if the *Teamsters* have already threatened to strike on July 31. In other words, O'Brien effectively admits that, in spite of its posturing, the union bureaucracy itself is under immense pressure to work out a deal to avoid a strike.

Much of this is self-inflicted. The union leadership feels compelled to make constant, "militant"-sounding public declarations to tamp down discontent among the rank and file, who are hostile to the bureaucracy and suspicious of the O'Brien administration. The apparatus is extremely sensitive to their lack of control over the situation and the possibility that with enough anger and dissatisfaction, things

could quickly get out of hand.

But there can also be no doubt that pressure is coming down from the Biden White House, which O'Brien was a regular visitor to last year when the Teamsters bureaucracy was helping to block a rail strike.

The Biden administration has relied heavily on the union bureaucracy for the past two years to block strikes in critical industries. If it could not accept a strike on the railroads, which it moved to ban after a White House-sponsored contract was defeated last year, it certainly cannot accept a strike by 340,000 UPS workers. Such a strike would not only shut down much of the US economy but embolden workers in other key industries. The national contracts for 150,000 autoworkers at Ford, General Motors and Stellantis, as well as the contract for 200,000 postal workers both expire in September, less than two months after the deadline at UPS.

Meanwhile, the Teamsters bureaucracy is working furiously and brazenly to prevent or shut down strikes by its members in other workplaces. They have worked to separate out local struggles by Coca-Cola and Sysco delivery drivers which have broken out in recent months. The union shut down a strike by 400 Coca-Cola drivers in Philadelphia by forcing workers to vote on a contract which they had not even seen. Tactics such as a "voting bus" parked on company property raised serious questions among workers as to the legitimacy of that vote.

Also this week, the Teamsters shut down a strike by Coca-Cola drivers in West Virginia, with Local 175 President Ken Hall explicitly declaring that this was done because of the strike's impact on customers—in other words, because it was successfully shutting down the company's operations, as a strike is supposed to do. Hall was also the last general secretary-treasurer before Zuckerman took office last year.

This capitulation at UPS came only two days after the Teamsters hosted an online meeting the previous Sunday, which lasted only 45 minutes and where no questions were taken from the audience. In that meeting, Zuckerman stated that "Sean O'Brien and I [Fred Zuckerman] have made it clear to UPS early on that the Teamsters would not begin national negotiations until all supplements were resolved."

However, he did note, "It is our hope and our intent for national negotiations to begin on Monday with UPS and Washington." Zuckerman added, "But of course, so much of that is reliant on UPS getting serious, making some final movement and giving our members, all of you, what you have earned."

Other speakers repeated the same mantra. "To waste that opportunity [to finish all supplemental agreements before moving onto national agreements] would be a shame," said Teamsters for a Democratic Union Steering Committee

member Corey Levesque, who chaired the meeting. TDU is a "reform" caucus which endorsed O'Brien's candidacy for president and now occupies top posts within his administration.

It only took two days for the trade union leadership to retreat on its position. Workers took to social media to express their disappointment, with one rank-and-file member commenting, "Why are the nationals even starting when supplementals aren't done? What a great way to start off not giving UPS anything Teamsters. Disappointed."

Another worker said, "Just gunna roll over for ups don't know why we're in national negotiations right now."

Comments such as these have abounded all over social media. Others have also pointed to other issues which have yet to be addressed, such as lack of sick leave, vacation and personal days off.

The sudden about-face on the supplemental deals is a serious warning to workers. If they are prepared to abandon this pledge at the drop of a hat, what other promises are the bureaucracy prepared to rip up? This underscores the need for UPS workers to take matters into their own hands to prevent the next betrayal.

This requires the development of a network of independent rank-and-file committees, uncontrolled by Teamster officials and accountable only to workers themselves, to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of O'Brien and the other bureaucrats.

Workers must demand not simply token representation in the talks but real control over them, with a bargaining committee elected entirely from the rank and file. At the same time, these committees will lay the framework for UPS workers to establish contact with workers in other logistics companies, both union and non-union, and prepare the ground for solidarity and joint actions.

If there is to be a real fight, it will only be organized by workers, not left-talking officials making empty promises.

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