

DSA “Strike Ready” UPS campaign promotes Teamsters bureaucracy and the Democratic Party

George Marlowe
15 May 2023

As over 340,000 UPS workers gear up for a major fight this summer as their contract expires at the end of July, the Democratic Socialists of America has begun holding a series of “Strike Ready” campaign meetings across the country to bolster the credibility of the Teamsters bureaucracy led by Sean O’Brien and the Democratic Party.

In the beginning of April, the DSA officially kicked off its UPS campaign with the slogan “Solidarity delivers the goods.” The DSA claims in its campaign material to stand in “unwavering solidarity with workers,” asking its local chapters to adopt and pass its strike ready resolution. The resolution states that local chapters will “publicly commit to the national Strike Ready campaign” and listen to “rank-and-file UPS Teamsters about what support they need throughout the contract fight.”

The DSA resolution also adds that the chapters would ask DSA-backed “socialist elected officials with connections to their chapter to commit to supporting the Teamsters throughout their contract fight.”

The DSA demonstrated its “solidarity” with strikers when three of its members in Congress, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, voted last year to ban a strike by 120,000 railroad workers, and to impose a contract which workers had already rejected. The purpose of the DSA’s campaign at UPS is to prepare the grounds for a repeat of the railroads by capturing and diverting the enormous support in the working class for UPS workers and by bolstering the credibility of the Teamsters bureaucracy and of the capitalist Democratic Party.

In the 2021 union elections, new Teamsters General President Sean O’Brien was promoted as a “reform” candidate by Teamsters for a Democratic Union, a faction within the Teamsters, as well as by the DSA. Last year, O’Brien and the Teamsters played a central role in the stall tactics by the rail unions to buy Congress time until after the midterms to ban the strike.

In response to rank-and-file anger over the current contract at UPS, which was imposed in 2018 by the bureaucracy in spite of a majority “no” vote by workers, O’Brien has repeatedly pledged to strike the logistics giant if a new national contract is not in place when the current one expires on July 31. In reality, in close consultation with the White House, the Teamsters are preparing another sellout. The Teamsters have already abandoned their own pledge to delay the start of national talks until all regional

supplemental agreements are in place, an indication that the bureaucracy is under intense pressure to get a deal done before its self-imposed deadline.

Chicago DSA promotes illusions in Teamsters bureaucracy and mayor-elect Brandon Johnson

Over the last few weekends, the DSA began holding meetings in various neighborhood wards in Chicago to promote the “strike ready” campaign. These meetings were addressed by DSA city aldermen (the equivalent of city council members in other cities), who also sought to promote the incoming mayoral administration of Brandon Johnson, who was elected with the support of the DSA, which has hailed his election as “transformative.”

In reality, the Johnson administration will be just as right-wing as the outgoing Lori Lightfoot administration. Johnson, a former Chicago Teachers Union organizer, repudiated his earlier pledge to “abolish the police,” and has said nothing about the police killing of Reginald Clay Jr., a 24-year-old Amazon worker. Johnson won with only 38 percent voter turnout, an indication of the deep distrust of the Democratic Party by large sections of the population. Workers in Chicago have seen their living standards lowered by one Democratic administration after another for decades, with good-paying industrial jobs decimated while wealth inequality and the number of billionaires have grown sharply in the region.

The elevation of Johnson expresses both the close integration of the union bureaucracy with the capitalist two-party system, as well as the increasingly heavy reliance on the DSA and other pseudo-left groups to provide radical and populist-sounding phrases to cover for the Democrats as they move further to the right.

Despite claiming more than 5,000 members among its ranks in Chicago, one of the strategic centers of both UPS and the logistics industry as a whole, the DSA meetings were sparsely attended. The audience largely consisted of layers close to the Teamsters, SEIU and Chicago Teachers Union bureaucracies.

The DSA’s 25th ward meeting on April 30 was held in the office of DSA alderman Byron Sigcho-Lopez. Sigcho-Lopez opened his

remarks by declaring, “There’s a big fight in the UPS contract, the biggest private contract in the country. The biggest this century—there’s a lot at stake.” He went on to promote the lie that the incoming Brandon Johnson administration’s victory was a “defeat for the billionaires” in Illinois and a boon for workers. “I know the new mayor. He is a labor organizer,” he said.

In fact, Johnson already declared his support for austerity at a mayoral forum when he said: “There will be some tough decisions to be made when I am mayor of the city of Chicago. And there might be a point within negotiations that the Chicago Teachers Union quest and fight for more resources—we might not be able to do it. Who is better able to deliver bad news to a friend than a friend?”

The meeting concluded with Sean Orr, a DSA member, Teamsters steward and co-chair of the national steering committee of Teamsters for a Democratic Union. “The Teamsters, the past 25 years things have been falling apart... their interests as a union leadership was with the companies,” he said. This has been changed, he claimed, by the TDU and the O’Brien administration. “Two years ago we changed the direction of our union. We flipped things at the top.”

Orr admitted that over half of the 12,000 UPS workers in Chicago “are making minimum wage... we’re at the bottom,” with many facing homelessness and eviction notices as workers are unable to afford to live in the Chicago metropolitan area despite UPS making billions in profits. UPS workers who fight back against supervisors pushing hostile work environments are retaliated against and fired, he added, with no protection.

He claimed that the Teamsters under Sean O’Brien would fight for a \$25 starting wage for part-time workers, with a so-called “rank-and-file negotiating committee” including over 50 people in Chicago. Such a “rank-and-file committee,” controlled by the bureaucracy and consisting of members picked by them, does not give workers real control over the talks, but is only window dressing for the bureaucracy’s maneuvers.

Orr also claimed that the Biden administration would not intervene in the UPS strike despite having done so with rail workers last year, claiming that UPS workers are not affected by the reactionary Railway Labor Act. This is part and parcel of a continuous cover-up campaign of the significance of the strike ban by both TDU and O’Brien, who even went so far as to deny that Biden had intervened against railroaders.

In point of fact, Orr’s argument that the government cannot intervene because the RLA does not apply to UPS workers is not true, as Biden has the authority to issue an injunction under the reactionary Taft-Hartley Act. At any rate, Biden’s preferred method, as he has employed against refinery workers and (so far) West Coast dockworkers, is to enforce a de facto injunction through the mechanism of the union bureaucracy.

One exchange that punctured the rosy narrative presented at the meeting was provoked by the presence of scapegoated Anthony Marano grocery workers, who have been victimized with the support of the Teamsters bureaucracy. As *Labor Notes*, a publication with close ties to the TDU and DSA, reported in March:

“In February, 70 grocery workers at Marano attended a workshop organized by Teamsters for a Democratic Union and CCWR on building a contract action plan with clear bargaining demands...

“Next, the company came after Vargas. A few days after the workers’ action, management had workers attend a series of Local 703 meetings held at the company. In front of management, *the union business agent* [emphasis added] denounced workers for wearing hats and holding meetings at Juan’s house. The very next day Vargas was fired.”

Vargas was present at the meeting in Chicago. Another worker’s daughter said the Marano workers “don’t have proper representation in the actual [Teamsters] committee meetings.”

What UPS workers really need to be “strike ready” is to prepare for a two-front war against both management and the corrupt trade union apparatus, which is joined at the hip with Washington and the Democratic Party in particular. But this is precisely what the DSA, which functions as a faction of both the Democrats and the apparatus, where it controls many top posts in unions around the country, is seeking to prevent. It is becoming increasingly prominent in both as they struggle to contain opposition from below.

In order to prevent yet another sellout and to fight for significant wage gains, an end to the tier system and much more, UPS workers must take matters into their own hands by building rank-and-file committees, in order to fight for the principle that the will of the rank and file must determine the conduct of the struggle, and unite the working class as a whole behind them.

UPS workers can look to the example of railroad workers, Caterpillar workers, Dana auto parts workers and other rank-and-file committees among autoworkers and educators. These committees are being built as part of a network of rank-and-file committees internationally to coordinate a working class counteroffensive against the corporations and the entire ruling class.

Fill out the form below to learn more.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact