

US truckers at ABF vote to strike as contract negotiations with Yellow and UPS continue

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28 May 2023

Are you a trucker at ABF or Yellow? Tell us what your conditions are like and what you're fighting for in the next contract. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Truck drivers for the national shipping company ABF have authorized strike action by 98 percent. The strike vote comes as the July 31 contract deadline for 340,000 UPS workers approaches; both truckers and UPS workers are in the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

Contract negotiations between the Teamsters and ABF are ongoing, with economic issues unresolved, along with “protections against purchased transportation, autonomous vehicles, and inward facing cameras in trucks.” ABF employs 8,000 Teamsters members as the “less than truckload” division of ArcBest, a holding company that manages logistics and owns ABF Freight and Panther.

Truckers for ABF face an escalating war on wages, with trucking companies competing to extract the greatest amount of wealth from workers. Truckers are expected to pay for continued record profits through effective wage cuts, assaults on jobs and reductions to benefits.

ArcBest posted a record profit year in 2022, raking in \$300 million in profit, up from \$213 million in 2021. Despite the booming profits, logistics companies are seeking to reduce their labor force and reduce labor costs in the coming years. A dropoff in shipping volumes since the first years of the pandemic and fears of a recession are prompting companies like ArcBest to pass costs onto workers and maintain their exorbitant payouts to shareholders and executives.

In 2016 ArcBest underwent a significant restructuring to streamline services and reduce operating costs. The result was the elimination of 130 jobs.

ABF's current contract with Teamsters truckers ends on June 30. Under the current contract, workers are only given 2 percent annual wage increases, well below the rate of inflation.

Similar contract negotiations are occurring with Yellow, another major player in the logistics industry. Yellow employs 22,000 Teamsters members, whose contract negotiations have been pulled forward by a year after the

company announced intentions to implement a complete overhaul of its subsidiaries and network systems.

Yellow plans to consolidate its subsidiaries into a single “superregional model” in order to streamline its services. The consolidation would impact 200 terminals across the country and is expected to close 28 terminals, eliminating jobs and increasing density loads on remaining employees.

Unlike ArcBest, Yellow has been unable to maintain profitability and has a staggering \$1.6 billion in debt. A key issue in the negotiations has been a plan by Yellow to reduce labor costs by creating “utility” positions, in which drivers would be expected to work on docks and at facilities within 175 miles of their home terminal. The plan would also consolidate seniority lists, requiring some employees to reapply for some positions.

The Teamsters have made a public spectacle of the negotiations, exchanging insults with Yellow's management. Yellow and the Teamsters have reportedly exchanged “heated letters” with each other and negotiations have periodically broken down. In one instance, Teamsters National Freight Director John Murphy accused Yellow of using the restructuring model to “enchant shareholders and distract investors,” essentially charging Yellow with defrauding investors.

The central issue for the Teamsters bureaucracy, however, is not that the cuts are taking place, but that it was not included in the business decisions. Teamsters negotiators have repeatedly complained that Yellow's restructuring is effectively a rewrite of the existing contract with truckers. In a memo to members issued in March, Murphy complained of the changes to contract language, but did not mention that Yellow had already eliminated 2,000 jobs between the fourth quarter of 2021 and 2022. The Teamsters have advised local unions to file unfair labor practices charges against Yellow if it attempts to negotiate the restructuring with employees directly, expressing the concern of the union that it will be sidestepped by the company.

Pushing against this, the Teamsters issued a 30-day notice to Yellow that it would no longer be able to use purchased

transportation to move freight. The union contract allows for the use of up to 29 percent of total “over the road miles” by purchased transportation which accounts for around 14 percent of Yellow’s revenue.

As talks continue, workers face a precarious situation. Yellow workers already face notably worse economic conditions than their fellow truckers at ABF. On average Yellow truckers make \$5 an hour less than ArcBest truckers, and they are slated to receive only a 3 percent, or 80 cents, raise this year as part of their contract. Yellow also offered workers a paltry 37 cent cost of living adjustment in April.

These are a reflection of how the Teamsters have sacrificed workers’ well-being to Yellow over the past several years. In an appeal to Yellow, the Teamsters argued that they had given “literally billions of dollars in wage and pension concessions.” After years of concessions to the shipping corporations, the Teamsters appear concerned that they can no longer keep a lid on worker outrage, as contracts for hundreds of thousands of Teamsters near expiration this summer.

This is especially true at UPS where workers remember their betrayal in 2018 when the Teamsters imposed a rejected contract using an anti-democratic loophole in its union constitution. Teamsters General President Sean O’Brien has been compelled to adopt a militant public persona, pledging to strike at UPS if a deal is not in place when the current deal expires at the end of July.

But this only means that the bureaucracy is under intense pressure to get a deal done before then, and the negotiating team has already violated its own pledge not to begin talks on a national deal until all regional supplementals have been finished. Meanwhile, the union has given no indication to workers as to when or how a strike authorization vote will actually take place.

The upcoming contract expiration at UPS is a critical factor in these talks at ABF and Yellow. The Teamsters recognize that a strike by hundreds of thousands of UPS workers would galvanize workers across the country and around the world, raising the risk of the struggles of logistics workers slipping out of the hands of the union bureaucracy.

Should ABF and/or Yellow workers strike before UPS completes its contract negotiations, UPS workers would be emboldened by their fellow Teamsters taking strike action and could push for similar action at UPS.

The Teamsters, one of the most corrupt and pro-company unions in the United States, has attempted to present itself as a reformed organization since its last leadership elections in 2021. Sean O’Brien, however, is no different from his predecessor. He was a key player in Hoffa’s administration and he has shown repeatedly that the status quo prevails in the Teamsters bureaucracy.

Worker at ABF, Yellow and UPS all face the same fundamental issues. Their employers are adamant that they must pay for the reduction in costs and the increase in profits that the corporate executives demand. For years, the Teamsters have made concessions to the corporations and called them victories, but the overwhelming strike authorization at ABF shows that workers are ready to fight back and stop the assault on wages and working conditions.

For the Teamsters bureaucracy, their primary concern is that their institutional interests are preserved by including them in the restructuring of the major logistics companies, not the interests of their members.

Workers must take their struggles out of the hands of the Teamsters bureaucracy and put themselves back in control of their fight against the companies.

Striking workers at auto parts manufacturer Clarios, facing a similarly pro-corporate bureaucracy in the United Auto Workers, have formed the Clarios Rank-and-File Committee to do just that. They have rejected two sellout contracts endorsed by new UAW President Shawn Fain, while autoworkers from the Dana Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee rallied workers at the Toledo Jeep plant to build a unified struggle of autoworkers against the corporate assault on jobs and workers.

The task ahead for logistics workers is the same. They cannot leave their struggle in the hands of the Teamsters, who are more than willing to betray them as they did in 2018 to UPS workers. The formation of rank-and-file committees, new labor organizations capable of putting workers back in control of their struggle, is critical in the defense of jobs and working conditions as the corporations looks to slash the labor force and make workers pay for record profits.

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