

UPS workers in New York City and Louisville speak out during snap Teamsters strike vote

Our reporters
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UPS workers: tell us what you want to fight for! Contact the WSWS by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

With a strike authorization vote finally underway, a mood of determination, but also frustration and deep distrust of the Teamsters bureaucracy, is taking hold among 340,000 UPS workers across the United States.

Workers are determined to win back decades of pro-company concessions, dramatic improvements to their working conditions, wages and hours and an end to management harassment. But the Teamsters apparatus under General President Sean O'Brien, a career official being falsely recast as a rank-and-file militant, is preparing a pro-company sellout behind closed doors. This is shown by the vote itself, which is being organized hastily and is far behind schedule. This is designed to deliberately suppress voter turnout in order to prevent the strike authorization vote from becoming a rallying point for the rank and file.

Teams from the WSWS spoke with workers over the weekend at facilities in New York City, as well as the massive Worldport air freight hub in Louisville, Kentucky. They distributed copies of last week's WSWS statement, "UPS workers: Form rank-and-file committees independent of the Teamsters bureaucracy to defeat the upcoming sellout, fight for a national strike!" which was received with great interest.

One worker in New York City initially refused to take a leaflet, but came back soon after. "I thought you were with the union. That is why I didn't take the leaflet or talk to you," he said. "I never heard about the strike authorization vote from a union official. It was other drivers who told me."

Significantly, Local 804 in New York City initially tried to limit the strike vote to last Thursday and Friday only, but was compelled to issue an extension.

Many workers in both New York and Louisville learned about the strike vote for the first time from the WSWS campaign team. "I didn't even know that was something which workers had the right to vote on," one Louisville part-timer said.

A New York driver said, "I don't know what to tell you. I don't know what is going on here. I don't know when the strike authorization vote is. I am a full-time driver with 36 years, and the company has always treated us badly. This is a company which makes over \$100 billion a year. Look how hard we work, and we get nothing.

"We worked through the pandemic and got nothing. We got no

hazard pay or anything. A lot of workers caught COVID, got sick and died. I got COVID, and a lot of people got it. A lot of people died. I worked every day, and got nothing for it. The government doesn't give us anything. The government doesn't care about us."

Several workers spoke about the conditions last week when air quality in New York City reached a hazardous level due to wildfires in Canada.

"Look at the Canadian fire smoke. The city was filled with a lot of smoke. You couldn't see, but we worked. I don't know how many workers passed out or got sick from this because I am an indoor driver, and I don't see the outside drivers very much."

Another worker said that the only instructions that they had gotten from management when the city was blanketed with smoke were commonplaces, like "Work at your own pace" and "Wear a mask if you want to." Masks were not provided. Workers were expected to perform as usual.

A full-time driver with five years said, "I just got a text today that said the vote would go on until Tuesday. I think the problems are that we got no hazard pay for working during the pandemic, and the 22.4 drivers [also known as hybrid drivers, who split their time between driving delivery trucks and working in the warehouse] who were brought in with the last contract. As an air driver, my top pay is almost \$10 an hour less than the top pay of a regular driver."

Another worker said, "Personal Vehicle Drivers are a problem. I don't know the number of them here, but they drive their own cars just like Amazon, and they do our work. The contract should not allow this." Although little is known about the content of the current contract talks, unconfirmed rumors are swirling on social media that UPS is demanding a significant expansion of PVDs.

A driver who has been a longtime contact said Saturday, "I have been getting your material for a while, and we do need a Rank-and-File Committee. The shop steward here is giving the company everything. We lose every grievance."

At both New York and Louisville, some workers reported being forced to work split shifts, in flagrant violation of the current contract. The Teamsters have done nothing to oppose this, which has become a regular practice by management. "We'd be doing like 4:30 to 8:30 in the morning, go home and then come back 4:30 to 8:30 in the evening," one second-tier "hybrid" driver told a New York rally in April. "We'll be getting like a lot of guys who are getting four or five hours of sleep."

On Saturday, a number of 22.4 drivers told the WSWS they had

worked split shifts at the 43rd Street hub.

Mechanics in Louisville told the WSWS the split shift system is widely used there as well. “UPS will deny that this takes place, but it does,” one worker said. It has become particularly widespread during the pandemic, he explained, because of sharp increases in package volumes caused by a shift towards online shopping, which has also produced record profits for the logistics company. “It’s not unusual for us to have to work 16 hours a day, seven days a week,” another mechanic said. “That was 18 hours in the last contract.”

While drivers, mechanics and other job classifications are being worked to the bone, part-time workers loading and sorting packages have so few hours that it is impossible to make ends meet.

“They always cut hours from January to March after the holidays, but now a lot of us are still only getting three hours a day,” one worker said, “But the workload stays the same. And if you’re on your way to punch out and some line is short staffed, they can grab you to work on that line and you can’t refuse.”

“We will typically get about 3.5 hours a day, and Sunday is our longest day in a week,” Noah, a part-timer, said. “We will usually never get more than six hours. That’s hard to pay the bills with. My partner works here too, and between the two of us, that’s basically one full time job.”

“Management harassment has gotten worse as the July 31 deadline approaches,” he continued. “In particular people are angry about the fact that they have gotten rid of the Friday shifts at the two-day air hub. That’s affected about half the people in my area. I think they’re trying to get people to leave entirely so that they aren’t around to vote on the contract.”

When asked about a recent video by a Local 89 official on the elimination of Friday shifts, who blandly declared that management had the “right” to change its business model, and that there was little the Teamsters union could do, Noah responded, “That just makes it so they feel that they can change whatever they want. They can’t whip us around like that out of nowhere.”

Asked his thoughts about the O’Brien administration, he said, “I mean, I’m not mad at them, but we could get much better communication. Most of what I know is because I’m on social media groups where other workers from across the country report what’s going on. But there have been no updates. They were giving us some details during the supplemental talks, but it’s just been getting less and less the closer we get to July 31.”

Many operations workers at Worldport are also concerned about the shuttle service which takes workers from the parking lot to their work locations on the massive site. This shuttle can take upwards of a half hour to ride, all of which is unpaid time, and the shuttle is frequently late. However, workers are still punished if they are late clocking in by even a single minute due to the lateness of the shuttle. Many workers want to see a more reliable shuttle system so that they are no longer docked for being late.

Jarrad, a worker with 20 years, only secured a full time position two years ago at Worldport. “Sixty percent of the 11,000 employees here—including supervisory staff—are part timers. So it’s extremely hard to get full-time work here,” he said. “This is the way it’s always been. Nothing’s changed for the better,

contract after contract. I was willing to give Sean O’Brien the benefit of the doubt because after [previous president] James Hoffa Jr. there really needed to be some kind of change for the better. But the more I find out about O’Brien, the more I think they’re dealing different cards out of the same deck.”

Ron, a mechanics at Worldport, is a veteran of the last national strike in 1997. He said he voted for that strike because the Teamsters’ administration under Ron Carey claimed they were fighting for full employment, but that strike turned out very differently from what they had been promised. Now, he and his coworkers have little faith in the Teamsters. He says he has learned about the history of O’Brien through the WSWS, especially his numerous visits last year at the White House.

“I am willing to go on strike if I know exactly what I am striking for,” he said. “But we’ve told them what our demands are months ago, and we’ve heard nothing since. They told everybody to sign up for this new Teamsters app where we would supposedly be given regular updates. But that thing hasn’t been updated in a month and a half. It’s gone dark.”

Jerry, another mechanic and veteran of the 1997 strike, said: “I’m all for authorizing a strike but they’re not telling us what we’d be striking for. They’re talking about issues that should have been resolved 20 years ago, like air conditioning in the trucks and the tiers.

“You never see anybody from the union. I haven’t seen the business agent in months. When he was the president of the local, I never saw [General Secretary Treasurer Fred] Zuckerman except a couple times, when they had candy-coated tours of the facilities. You never see any of them.

“They are basically telling the mechanics to make chicken salad out of chicken s***. They’re not giving us the materials we need. They rejected a request for metal shipments the other day. UPS made \$100 billion in revenue last year, \$15.6 billion in profits and we’re not even getting a sniff of that.

“And they have all of these handshake agreements with the company over stuff that should have been dealt with years ago. With this strike vote, which is being held extremely late, we don’t even know what we’d be striking for. They tell us nothing. But the company already knows what they’re gonna do.

“I barely even know anything about Sean O’Brien. If you ask anyone else you’d probably get a similar response. That’s how far they are from us. We’re only dimly aware of who they even are.”

He stressed, however, that a strike would only have an impact to the extent that it found broad support.

“If the pilots [who are in a different union] support our strike, that makes all the difference. That will hurt UPS,” he said.



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