

UPS workers vote overwhelmingly to strike, as Teamsters boast about sham deal for AC in trucks

Chicago UPS workers speak out: “We need to go on strike now”

Tom Hall, George Marlowe, Jessica Goldstein

16 June 2023

Work at UPS? We want to hear from you. Tell us what you think about the strike vote and the contract talks. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

UPS workers in the United States have voted to authorize strike action at the logistics giant by 97 percent, according to a Friday press release from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The voting took place over the past week at locals around the country.

The margin reflects a fighting mood among rank-and-file UPS workers. They are determined to win better working conditions, end the exploitation of part-time workers and second-tier, “hybrid” drivers and beat back the company’s demands for expanding Uber-style “personal vehicle deliveries,” among other key demands.

But the Teamsters bureaucracy is working deliberately to sabotage this determination. In the press release, they claim that the strike authorization vote gives the bureaucracy “maximum leverage” at the bargaining table.

In fact, the strike vote was slapped together at the last minute and structured in a way to deliberately suppress turnout. Instead of sending out voting packets to all 340,000 members at UPS, the union left each local to hastily organize the vote themselves. In some areas, polls were open only a few hours, and were only available at the local union hall. At the large Local 804 in New York City, polls were originally scheduled to be open only last Thursday and Friday, before they were suddenly extended for an extra two days without explanation.

In discussions with WSWS reporters at major UPS facilities in Louisville, New York City and Chicago, many workers, especially younger part-timers, reported not even being aware that a strike vote was taking place.

Significantly, no information on the voter turnout was released by the Teamsters. One insider, speaking with the WSWS before the results were released and on condition of anonymity, predicted that turnout would only end up being around 50,000 total voters, or 14.7 percent.

For months, the Teamsters bureaucracy under General President Sean O’Brien has pledged to strike UPS by July 31, when the current contract expires, if a deal is not in place by then. This only means that it is determined to ram through a sellout deal before

that deadline. A seriously-constituted strike vote, with adequate notice to workers and ample time and means to cast a ballot, would have served as a pole of attraction for workers’ opposition not only to the company, but to the Teamster bureaucracy, against whom there is deep distrust and anger after the union rammed through a pro-company deal in 2018 that a majority of workers had rejected. In fact, in 2018 the strike authorization vote was completed weeks earlier than the present vote, despite the fact that the union made no pretense that it might call a strike.

Over the past week, the union has bragged about a supposedly historic agreement reached in the talks to require air conditioning in UPS delivery trucks for the first time. UPS routinely removes AC from vehicles after purchasing them to cut costs, leading to multiple cases of heat stroke and even deaths among delivery drivers during summer heat waves.

But even according to the Teamsters’ own self-serving press release, in-cab air conditioning will only be provided in vehicles purchased in 2024 or later. Current vehicles will be only be given fans for the cabs, and air conditioning installed in the *backs* of trucks in the cargo compartments. Given that UPS routinely keeps trucks in operation for 25 years or more, this “victory” means that some drivers could still be without AC until 2050.

“Until 2018, we were still driving models from 1988, 1992,” one southern California delivery driver told the WSWS. “Why did we still have them? Because they were cheap. They were impossible to drive, with stick shifts that were impossible to use. But even then, we only got rid of them in 2018 because of environmental regulations in California banning the use of diesel delivery trucks. Those regulations aren’t in force in the rest of the country.

“People on social media are asking, okay, what did we give up in exchange for the AC? There’s something fishy going on here.”

Chicago UPS workers: “We deserve a lot more”

The WSWS spoke to Chicago UPS drivers and warehouse

workers at the Jefferson Street hub. Workers overwhelmingly spoke out in support of a strike to fight for higher wages, an end to the 22.4 two-tier driver system, and better working conditions.

A new UPS worker said, “I just started two weeks ago. I’m working to be a driver. I work as a loader. We make only \$18 an hour. The cost of everything is going up in Chicago. We deserve a lot more.”

“I think it’s good we’re going to vote to strike,” a young UPS worker added. “I’m going to vote ‘yes’ because we need more hours. I’m part-time. I get \$18 an hour. I don’t see my money... Sometimes I come early, sometimes they send me home because they say they don’t need anybody. Today we are working 6-10. That’s 4 hours. What can you do with that? That’s pocket money.”

She added, “We do need more hours and more pay and more days. I used to work for another company. We got paid more, and we got 40 hours a week. My check is like \$176. Why does my check keep coming up short? I want to make \$40 an hour—that’s a good wage to live in Chicago. We’re just trying to make it now.”

A UPS package car driver added, “The old Hoffa administration pushed the contract through. We should have gone on strike in 2018. How were they going to allow something like that to pass? For the guys who work next to you to take a pay cut? An honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay... why pay everyone different? I’ve worked here for three years. We were exposed to COVID when the pandemic started. I caught COVID during work. I have no idea who I got it from—we were exposed to everyone. A lot of drivers came down with it. And of course we got no hazard pay for putting our lives on the line. We need to go on strike now.”

Two hybrid, or “22.4” drivers also spoke out against the two-tier system for delivery drivers. “That 22.4 has got to go. We’re both 22.4. It’s the same as a regular driver but we get paid a little less. We get up to \$10-15 less. We do the same work and get paid less than the full drivers. It’s a two-tier system. One guy gets paid more. And we drive in hot trucks that are like an oven sometimes.”

“We shouldn’t have 22.4s,” another UPS package car driver said. “And I voted ‘yes’ to strike. I only worked here for 4 or 5 years. The 22.4 is the biggest thing for me. It doesn’t seem fair. I was the last class that they made regular package car drivers. Everyone who came after me was a 22.4. At top scale the pay difference was \$10 an hour. It’s pretty big. It’s a four-year progression. The first year or two it looks similar, but with each year of progression, the gap gets bigger.”

He added, “The 22.4’s also don’t get overtime protection—which is huge to me. I don’t like mandatory overtime at all. I wish there was no overtime, or at least a gray period of eight hours. It’s absurd the only time we can get an eight-hour day is if we ask for it. We can only have two a month, and they never honor it anyway. They’d rather just pay the penalty than accommodate it. UPS is also watching you [on camera] to see if you screw up. UPS is doing all this because it’s only about the money. There’s no other reason.”

“They do work that’s effectively the same. Technically they’re supposed to do work inside. But I’ve never seen that happen until very recently when the post-COVID volume returned to normal—then they started moving the 22.4s to do preload and stuff

like that. But before that they were doing the exact same work.”

“We’ve known a couple guys who passed out when it got really hot. They don’t talk about that much. Management will say, ‘stay hydrated.’ I just don’t imagine UPS would have air conditioners either. Just like Amazon workers, we also pee in bottles. Sometimes it’s hard to find a place, especially if you’re working an all residential route. You may not be able to find a place.”

Another 22.4 driver at the Jefferson hub voted to strike and denounced the Teamsters union’s capitulation to the corporation’s interests in the 2018 contract struggle. “For us, the gap between 22.4 driver pay and regular driver pay is not fair,” he said. “It’s not fair because we’re doing the same thing for less pay. I don’t understand how they set the contract like that. The company makes a lot of money off that. I get paid \$5 per hour less and I work 10 hours a day, so I already lost \$50—and that’s one day. I could lose thousands a year compared to if I was a regular driver, and that’s just me. Think of how many other drivers they have at this rate across the company.”

“How come they signed the new contract when we got less? I hope they take 22.4s out of the new contract. I started at \$20.50, but the regular drivers started at \$21. We got screwed. For the last contract, the regular drivers are raised \$1 in the first year, and then \$2 in the second and so on. And we were raised just \$0.75 the first year, then \$1.50 in the second. That’s unfair.”

“I don’t understand how the Teamsters could sign a contract that’s so unfair like that. They already knew it was so unfair to all the employees. I joined the union after the 2018 contracts were signed so I had no choice. I waited for 3 years for a new contract and I don’t want it to be like the last one. This year, I realized this is a new contract so I have to say something—even if nothing’s going to change, I need to say something. I voted to strike yesterday. Hopefully they’re going to do something to change.”

“They compare us to Amazon workers to try to tell us we’re getting higher pay, but it’s still not enough. We’re not forgetting we’re still getting paid less than regular drivers.”

He agreed with the perspective that it would be effective to fight to unite the struggles of logistics workers, including expanding the fight to Amazon workers whom they are pitted against.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact