

Virginia UPS worker speaks out on conditions in the company's warehouses

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Work at UPS? Tell us what you think about the company's wages proposal by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Earlier this month, United Parcel Service (UPS) workers voted by a 97 percent margin to strike against the logistics giant's new labor contract proposal. The company aims to add tiers and further erode wages and working conditions for 340,000 US workers organized under the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The International Brotherhood of Teamsters, while pledging to strike if a deal is not in place by the time the current deal expires on August 1, has been frantically working to get a deal done before then.

Warehouse workers are the lowest paid section of the company's workforce. Overwhelmingly part-time and hamstrung by tiers and split shift schedules, the warehouse employees would face an effective wage freeze under the company's initial compensation proposal. (See "UPS demands new tiers, massive wage concessions in next contract with Teamsters union")

Jay spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the terrible working conditions in a UPS hub in central Virginia. His name has been changed to protect his identity, out of concerns of management harassment.

"In the warehouse, the water's not good," Jay said. "The plumbing is bad. I think the water pipes are tied into the plumbing because the water will make you sick. UPS will normally bring in pallets of water, but there are a lot of dry spells. The bottled water's not even cold, but at least we get some water that way."

"There's no ice," he added. "They took out the ice machines about six or seven years ago. They said it was mildewing, but they said they didn't have any maintenance to fix it. They didn't want to pay anybody to clean it."

"The bathrooms are always out of order. The water's rising in the toilets with feces sitting in it, and they just

put plastic bags on it for months. They hire cleanup crews, but at one point they didn't have a cleanup crew and you saw mice running across the floor. It just wasn't getting clean. When the bathroom is out of order, nobody plunges. It's unhealthy to be breathing that stuff in every day causing mold and flooding."

"One guy filed a grievance and they took care of one bathroom," he noted, "but there are other bathrooms in bad shape that they haven't fixed."

"The building is old," Jay told the WSWS. "You really can't extend our hub to improve it. It's been here since the 1960s or 70s, and they have not done any renovation besides adding another level for small sort, the small items." In general, he said, the tools and equipment were also old and in disrepair, including electric mule cars used to haul irregular, heavy packages.

"It's a warehouse, you're gonna deal with the heat and all kinds of weather because the bay doors stay open all the time for the trucks to come in and out. You could have AC on, but there's really no point. The ventilation is terrible."

"During Covid," he added, "a lot of people got sick. I never got sick by the grace of God, but a lot of people were out during that time."

Jay described his work day: "I work two shifts, twilight and midnight. I go in at five o'clock and work until nine-thirty, then take an hour break at ten-thirty I start my midnight shift. A typical day is like a nine-hour day. I work four nines and a four. I go into the lunchroom and eat my lunch and wait. I used to get in my car to get away from the facility but instead of wasting gas and my break time, I just wait. I stay in the building."

"We deal with heavy stuff, almost freight level, a hundred or two-hundred pounds. We scan the packages and make sure they get to the right place in the building to get to the package cars. We handle next-day air stuff, too, and international stuff as well."

“The time clocks are dysfunctional,” Jay stated. “That’s how the management shaves time. It’s always issues with people’s time and when you file a grievance, they drag their feet,” especially with newer employees.

“There are thousands of workers at the hub. They try to downsize by sending a lot of people home. They send a lot of young people home, which is totally opposite from the way it was when I was young. That’s how they save money and up the production at the same time.”

“The older workers are more dependable,” Jay said, because they are better trained. “But young people, what are they gonna have? You gotta train them so they know what they’re doing. Some of the workers here are older, in their 60s or even their 70s. They work us to death.

“The young people are more ‘expendable’ now. The company hires a lot of the young kids for temporary, seasonal work. If they don’t work out in 30 days, UPS can just get rid of them. The new guys are not a part of the union because they’re not here long enough. You gotta pass your probationary period to join, and it’s optional for part-time.

“A lot of the warehouse workers are part-time. UPS needs to create more full-time jobs. I would say in my hub it might be 70 percent part-time workers and 30 percent full-time. UPS has been saying for years that they’re going to create more full-time jobs but it’s been the opposite. The young people are poor, and work second jobs, and don’t even come into work because there’s no money. They get benefits and that’s the only reason they stay, but those working second jobs get too tired, and it’s too much gas money. It’s just not worth it.”

With spiking inflation and the untenable rise in housing costs in central Virginia, Jay noted, “A single person would need to make at least \$50,000 to \$60,000 to make it here. When I was single in 2006, I was paying \$500 to \$600 a month in rent. But apartments are now running \$2,000 a month. You’d think it was almost better to buy a house, but houses are also going up.

“I’ve got a few years before I can retire, to take care of my family and pay everything off, and that’s got to be a calculated move. I want to make sure I do everything right.”

“I used to drive for UPS,” he continued. “I know a lot of drivers and from what they’re telling me, they got rid of a lot of positions like air drivers, who took care of next-day air deliveries. The company downsized a lot of those positions and got the regular drivers delivering that stuff. They’re working the drivers to death now. They’re doubling up the packages on their routes.”

With surveillance cameras and timing each stop, drivers have difficulty even taking bathroom or meal breaks. “That’s one of the reasons I stopped driving. There’s no life in it. I started creating a family. I said, ‘There’s no way I could do this. My mind would go crazy.’

“It’s a stressful job, driving. People look at it and think it’s easy. You’re not only dealing with the hustle and bustle of the job, you’re dealing with customers. And [if there is a rude customer] then you come back and you’re dealing with management, and they treat you like garbage, too. They treat you like you’re nothing. From all sides it’s a lot of pressure.”

“The drivers deserve what they are asking for,” Jay stated, “but I feel like the warehouse guys are not being heard enough, because we’ve got a lot of issues in the warehouse that are not being addressed in the contract negotiations.”

“I feel like there’s corruption in the union, and that’s why they don’t do anything about these conditions,” he said. “You’ve got union leaders rubbing elbows with the management, cutting deals, and there’s favoritism. They look at some of these grievances and say, ‘Oh, nah, you’re good.’

“They’re taking up for the management and it’s like, ‘Whose side are you on? You’re collecting our dues, that come out of our paychecks every week, and you’re going out partying and having fun, probably going out to these bars with the management, laughing and joking.’”

“There’s a lot of holes that need to be filled.” He added: “There’s a lot of mice in the warehouse that need to be run out.”



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