

Teamsters union threatens strike at UPS as bureaucracy struggles to rein in workers

Tom Hall
28 June 2023

Work at UPS? Tell us what you think about the strike threat and what you are demanding in the next contract. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) issued a statement Wednesday afternoon calling a strike at UPS “imminent.” According to the statement, the union’s negotiating team has walked out of talks for the second time in a week and is demanding that the company issue its “last, best and final offer” by Friday. “The largest single-employer strike in American history now appears inevitable,” General President Sean O’Brien declared.

The statement comes after UPS issued demands for sweeping economic concessions last week. Under the company’s wage proposal, new tiers would be created out of new hires topping out at a lower rate, and the starting wages of part-time workers would be frozen for the length of the contract. Inadequate cost-of-living adjustments and wage increases would make workers even poorer through inflation.

Workers showed clearly in a 97 percent strike authorization vote that they are determined to win back decades of concessions at the company, where the vast majority are part-timers making as little as \$15.50 an hour. The threat to strike by the Teamsters bureaucracy, however, is hot air. Behind the bluster, the bureaucracy is doing everything it can to prevent a strike. It imposed the current contract in 2018 in spite of a majority “no” vote by the membership. O’Brien, before falsely recasting himself as a rank-and-file militant to prepare his election to the union’s top post, was infamous as an ally of previous President James Hoffa Jr., and he played a key role in the 2013 contract at UPS.

However, the fact that the bureaucracy feels compelled to make such statements is a sign of extreme nervousness about the danger of rank-and-file opposition from workers, among whom both management and the union apparatus are deeply hated. For months, the Teamsters have engaged in theatrics, threatening to strike on August 1 if a deal is not in place by the expiration of the current deal at the end of July, in order

to try to keep rank-and-file anger under their control.

Wednesday’s statement is shot through with contradictions. The blaring headline says that a strike is “imminent,” but the statement itself continues to keep to the earlier August 1 deadline. “UPS risks putting itself on strike by August 1 and causing devastating disruptions to the supply chains and other parts of the world,” the union declares halfway through the statement.

Moreover, while the Teamsters declare that “time has run out” and the company has dug in its heels, the same statement admits that talks were well advanced by Tuesday night. “Despite early progress, UPS attempted to move the goalposts at the 11th hour,” the union claims. At the same time the statement declaring an “imminent” strike was released, Teamsters Local 431 announced that negotiators had reached an agreement for the supplemental contract in Northern California.

It is not outside the realm of possibility that a deal may be announced by the end of the week and that Wednesday’s statement is part of an orchestrated campaign to present a deal with minor changes to UPS’s original proposal as the product of “tough negotiating” by the Teamsters.

In a tersely worded statement, UPS did not respond directly to the Teamsters “threat” of a strike, instead claiming that the company had submitted “a significantly amended proposal to address key demands from the Teamsters” this week and that the company is still “working around the clock to reach an agreement.”

Wednesday was only the latest in a series of theatrical statements by the Teamsters bureaucracy, all of which were quickly walked back.

Prior to the start of talks, the union had pledged that it would not begin negotiations on the national master agreement until tentative agreements had been reached for all of the local supplemental deals. Then, in May, it violated its own pledge by starting national talks with two major supplemental agreements still unresolved. At the time, O’Brien tweeted that the Teamsters, unlike UPS, was determined to “keep this process moving.” The union did

not explain what motivation UPS would have for dragging its feet if the Teamsters seriously intended to strike on August 1, indicating that it was the union bureaucracy which felt the most intense pressure to get a deal done before then.

Following that, a series of statements and vague “updates” posted to social media indicated that regular progress was being made, and the Teamsters announced in less than two weeks that all “non-economic” issues had been settled. No concrete information was given to workers about what had been agreed to, however, and the union voluntarily signed a non-disclosure agreement from the outset of the talks.

Following the release of the company’s initial economic proposal last week, the Teamsters bureaucrats suddenly pivoted from their reassuring tone and declared they were walking out of the talks, pledging not to return to the bargaining table until the company submitted a “serious” proposal.

The bureaucracy then violated *this* pledge when it returned to the bargaining table earlier this week. Seeking to cover its tracks, the Teamsters simultaneously issued a statement Tuesday declaring UPS “had one week” to get a tentative agreement done, or it would “demand” the company submit its “last, best and final offer,” effectively ending talks. This was followed by the latest statement the following day moving the “deadline” up to Friday.

Internal discussions within the apparatus do not suggest the bureaucracy has any intention of calling a strike. Over the weekend, a highly unusual meeting of the General Executive Board (GEB) was held, in which no substantive information on the state of UPS talks was presented, according to sources. Only a perfunctory report on UPS was submitted beforehand repeating what the union has already stated publicly. There were also no reports prepared either on the union’s political activities or on its freight division, where a national contract at trucking company ABF was being voted on and where rival company Yellow is on the verge of bankruptcy. The meeting lasted all of 3.5 hours; a normal GEB meeting typically lasts one-and-a-half days.

In other words, whatever is being planned at UPS is so sensitive that not even Teamster vice presidents are being informed of it.

The Teamsters statement may also be a signal to the federal government to become involved directly in the talks, which took place on the West Coast docks earlier this month and last year on the railroads. In both cases, the Biden administration intervened to “broker” a pro-company contract, leaving the union bureaucracy the task of imposing it against rank-and-file opposition. There can be no doubt that the federal government is already heavily involved in the talks, as it has been in every major national contract over the past two years. O’Brien played a key role in the railroad

contract talks last year (two of the three largest rail unions are part of the Teamsters union), and he is a frequent visitor to the White House.

If attempts to block a strike and impose a sellout through the mechanism of the bureaucracy fail, the next line of defense for the pro-corporate Biden administration, with the support of the Republicans, would be to intervene directly and ban a strike, as took place last year on the railroads. But the unions have been the preferred mechanism through which the self-described “most pro-union president in American history” has sought to ban strikes de facto and enforce pro-company contracts. While strike activity has grown modestly over the past two years, among industrial workers strike activity has been virtually nil, and wage increases for unionized workers have been even lower than for nonunion workers.

In recent weeks, however, major strikes by industrial workers have erupted--by 6,000 machinists at Spirit AeroSystems in Wichita, Kansas; 1,500 Wabtec locomotive manufacturing workers in Erie, Pennsylvania; and more than 500 workers at the Clarios auto battery plant in Holland, Ohio.

The growing opposition of the working class is colliding at every point with the trade union bureaucracy, which is responding to the growth of the class struggle by closing ranks with management and capitalist governments. To fight back, workers need to develop their own initiative and establish alternative structures, rank-and-file committees, which they democratically control and which give them the means to counter the pro-corporate sabotage by the union bureaucrats. To defeat the conspiracy of UPS and the Teamsters bureaucracy, UPS workers should build rank-and-file committees in every warehouse and transportation hub.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact