

More hot air at UPS as Teamsters falsely claim “victory” on second-tier wages

Tom Hall, Jacob Crosse
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Talks continued between UPS and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters this weekend, in spite of statements from the union declaring a strike by August 1 “inevitable” and demanding the company’s “last, best and final offer” by last Friday. Now, the Teamsters are calling for the contract to be settled by July 5.

This is the latest in a series of maneuvers by the union designed to head off strike action by 340,000 workers and impose a sellout contract at the largest unionized private employer in the United States. They are using such bluster to frame the sellout which they are working out behind closed doors as the product of “tough negotiating.” The bureaucracy has also pledged greater transparency in the contract talks, but it signed a non-disclosure agreement at the outset in order to prevent workers from learning the real content of the talks.

To prevent a sellout, rank-and-file workers must organize themselves independently to prepare for a struggle against both the company and the pro-corporate bureaucracy, and behind both of them, the White House and both big business parties, which banned a rail strike late last year and imposed a company contract workers had previously rejected.

Friday’s deadline was the latest “ultimatum” which was then quickly abandoned by the union. However, it is likely that the union will be pushing as hard as possible to meet its new deadline of this Wednesday in order to give itself time to ram through the new contract in advance of their self-declared August 1 strike deadline, when the current contract expires.

At the start of talks, the Teamsters bureaucracy declared they would not begin talks on the national agreement until tentative agreements had been reached for all 44 supplemental deals at the local and regional levels. However, the Teamsters quickly reversed themselves. The last local deal was only struck Sunday night, for 7,000 workers at Local 710 in Chicago. No details whatsoever were released by the union on the content of that agreement, which is technically a separate, local-specific contract rather than a supplemental rider to the national contract. The deal covers all non-economic issues for Chicago-area UPS workers.

On Saturday, with the negotiating committee lined up behind him, General President Sean O’Brien held a short nine-minute press conference which provided no new information to workers. O’Brien boasted of “54 changes” to the contract and “zero concessions” since negotiations started, without identifying what those changes were or substantiating this claim. “UPS came back to the table [last week] knowing we’re serious, made some movement, so we made a commitment to resume negotiations,” he declared. “UPS—ball is in their court. We have to come to an agreement by July 5 in order to get

that thing ratified by the expiration date [August 1].”

O’Brien combined blustering threats to walk out on August 1 with groveling appeals to UPS to be “responsible” and not to “stay loyal to Wall Street and forget about Main Street,” as though the interests of workers and the profit interests the capitalists could be reconciled through a “fair” agreement. “If they do that, they are making a choice. A choice to strike themselves ... UPS will be responsible for stopping supply chains through this country,” he declared. Instead, he called on UPS to “be the model of what it means to be a good employer.”

O’Brien boasted that UPS workers have remained on the job throughout the pandemic. “The one thing that was constant was our Teamsters going to work every single day, making certain the supply chain kept flowing through this country. We have part-timers going to work in these warehouses, with total disregard for themselves and their families. Putting themselves at risk, putting their families at risk. We have members that died because they went to work to provide these services.” The net result, O’Brien said, was that the company’s profits doubled during the pandemic.

But this deplorable sacrifice of workers’ lives for profit is entirely the fault of the Teamsters bureaucracy, which forced workers to stay on the job in these death traps. They reprised that role over the last month as the Canadian wildfires have poured dangerous levels of smoke into cities across the Midwest and Northeastern US, forcing workers to work through dangerous smoke which was making them sick.

“We were ‘heroes’ during the pandemic,” a UPS worker in Pennsylvania told the WSWs. “When that started I went from part-time to full-time working at UPS,” he said. However, he ended up taking a pay cut at his facility because of a Market Rate Adjustment (MRA) at his warehouse which bumped up the pay of part-time workers only. “I ended up going backward in pay when I went full-time,” he said.

“I was a package carrier during the pandemic. We were delivering to sometimes 200 stops in a day. No hazard pay. The 6-foot rule didn’t exist [during the first years of Covid]. My facility still has us on overtime.”

“They just want to pay us less,” he said. “Currently, the company is getting rid of part-time workers and working us in-progression full-time people the most because we are paid less,” he explained. The worker said under the new offer being proposed by the company, his top rate would be cut by over \$12, essentially wiping out his progress to the pay of a full-time worker.

Teamsters hail bogus “concession” on second-tier drivers

On Saturday night, the Teamsters claimed they had scored a huge victory by reaching an agreement with the company to eliminate second-tier hybrid drivers, also known as “22.4s” after the clause in the contract. These drivers make lower pay than regular drivers, and split their time between making deliveries and working inside warehouses. They also claimed the company agreed to make Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday a paid holiday and end forced overtime on workers’ days off.

“The extraordinary gains,” a union statement declared, were made possible by the “an aggressive public warning ... that UPS was running out of time to reach a deal.”

“Gains made by the Teamsters at the national table ... cannot be overstated,” O’Brien was quoted as saying. “With enough persistence, grit & intestinal fortitude, the Teamsters can and will eliminate inequality at UPS,” Fred Zuckerman, the union’s general secretary-treasurer, declared.

There is just one problem with this statement: eliminating 22.4s was initially *offered by UPS* in their regressive economics proposal. Sources who spoke with the WSWS say the move was widely expected and that UPS had not saved as much money as they had hoped from the hybrid position. But UPS is also demanding that 22.4s be replaced with a third tier consisting of all delivery drivers hired after August 1, with top pay even lower than that for 22.4s. The Teamsters did not even mention this in their statement, or whether they have already agreed to this.

In other words, the Teamsters bureaucracy is hailing as a “huge victory” the terms of UPS’s own proposal. This is more evidence that the Teamsters’ strategy is to use angry-sounding statements to frame whatever pro-company contract they are cooking up as an historic deal produced by the bureaucracy’s “tough negotiating,” in order to ram through the deal and keep rank-and-file opposition under control.

Teamsters for a Democratic Union covers for the bureaucracy

The bureaucracy is perpetrating a massive fraud on UPS workers. While they have carried out one sellout after another for decades, the particular methods which are being employed are a continuation of those used in O’Brien’s own election campaign for general president in 2021. A thuggish ally of former president James P. Hoffa and one of the union’s top negotiators in the 2013 sellout at UPS, he suddenly recast himself as a hard-nosed “militant” leader of the rank and file.

He received and still receives crucial assistance from pseudo-left groups like Teamsters for a Democratic Union and Labor Notes. TDU, which once claimed it was fighting to “democratize” the union by changing the officials occupying the top seats, has now effectively been integrated with the bureaucracy.

On Friday, the Teamsters held “practice pickets” around the country—outside of normal working hours, meaning no operations were affected—which TDU had been promoting for weeks. Of course, many workers participated in these “practices” because they want to carry out a real fight. But from the bureaucracy’s standpoint, the purpose was to create the false optics of the bureaucracy mobilizing the membership for a strike while doing the exact opposite.

Significantly, TDU has quietly dropped its \$25 per hour starting wage demand for part-timers from its online presence, replacing it with vague calls for “major wage increases.” This is a sign that the group is trying to ratchet back workers’ expectations in advance of a tentative agreement which falls far below what workers are demanding.

TDU has held regular online meetings in recent months to stump for the union bureaucracy. In one meeting on June 10, TDU National Organizer David Levin claimed that O’ Brien represented “new leadership, a completely different day.”

In response to workers who were angry over the conduct of last month’s strike authorization vote, which was slapped together last-minute in order to suppress voter turnout, Levin advised them to not “stir up negativity.” Instead, he said, “fill out a strike action form and get involved with the ‘Make UPS Feel the Heat’ campaign.”

At points, the meeting bordered on the farcical. While it lasted less than an hour, TDU officials spent several minutes hawking their apparel and \$100 yearly TDU memberships. Levin ended the meeting by declaring they would be passing out whistles to workers so that they can “blow the whistle on corporate greed.”

The meeting held June 24 was even shorter than the previous one. The TDU again ignored many questions asked by rank-and-file workers from the floor while promoting “practice picketing,” declaring that this would show the UPS corporation that the Teamsters were “serious” about getting an “honorable” contract. Rob Atkinson, a 35-year Teamsters steward, articulated the perspective of the TDU officials: “We stand united behind Sean and Fred [Zuckerman].” Atkinson claimed that “after decades of contract givebacks under Hoffa, we are on the verge of victory right now.”

The bureaucracy cannot be “reformed” from within. Instead, workers must develop an alternative power structure which they control, by forming rank-and-file committees at hubs across the country. These committees must expose the maneuvers of the apparatus to their coworkers, distribute information which is being kept from them and fight to transfer control of the contract talks from the unaccountable apparatus to workers.

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