

Grueling workloads, missing pay: Virginia worker speaks on terrible conditions inside UPS warehouse

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With a July 31 contract expiration date looming, another United Parcel Service (UPS) worker spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about exploitative conditions in one of the company's Virginia hubs. Along with the hazardous and demanding physical labor, extreme heat and filthy conditions all too common in American warehouses, UPS hub workers have told the WSWWS that they've been repeatedly underpaid after their supervisors entered their time incorrectly.

The bureaucracy of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, fearful of losing control of the rank-and-file, has threatened repeatedly to strike on August 1 if a new contract is not in place. The union is pushing for a deal to be reached by this Wednesday in order to ensure that enough time is in place to pass a contract before the deadline.

Dan, whose name has been changed to protect his identity, is a part-time employee with nearly 20 years at UPS. He works nights in three-hour shifts at a warehouse after working full-time days in a restaurant kitchen.

Employees at logistics companies are under constant surveillance and subject to timed metrics to maximize productivity. UPS warehouses are no exception.

"A lot of that is unknown to the workers, as far as being timed for productivity," Dan said, "but I think that's where the part-time supervisors are pushing demands like, 'this 46-foot trailer needs to be loaded by midnight.' It's 11 o'clock and you've got one hour to do that. And depending on the volume, that could be easy or it could be very, very hard."

Dan explained how demands for speed exacerbate already dangerous work. "Generally it's two individuals to a truck, with one person pushing the flow in, and those trucks are ungodly hot in the summer and wickedly cold in the winter. There's a fan, which does move the air, but that's about it. That's just loading trucks.

"Boxes are falling, and heaven forbid anything happen in the truck, and you're way at the very end and you have to get 46 feet out, and there's boxes everywhere. There's egress issues.

"If they were really picky about things like that, they would find a better way to do it," Dan pointed out. "That's UPS and safety. That's been going on for a long, long time. So much of it comes down to money, and unfortunately, that's how business A, B or C does it: 'How much does it cost?'"

Beyond the speedup demands, management in UPS hubs are

financially incentivized to trim hours clocked by workers in order to boost the average hourly productivity numbers in their facilities.

"In the area I work in, we don't even have a time clock," Dan told the WSWWS. "We write in our name and start time, and pray that at some point a supervisor transcribes it all correctly. Many times that doesn't happen. I have lost countless paid time."

He noted: "The supervisors get bonuses, possibly quarterly, based on output. If, for this week or this month, you perform under par, then by any means you reach that goal [the supervisors] are more likely to get compensated."

The financial incentivization to commit what amounts to wage theft is not limited to Dan's hub. Another UPS worker at a different hub confirmed the practice of supervisors deliberately misrecording times.

"A couple of supervisors have been fired in the past 20 years but it should have been more," Jay told the WSWWS. "The other ones slip through the cracks and get away with it. They do it to make their production look better." Asked whether those supervisors are rewarded for higher production numbers, the worker responded: "Oh yes. They get bonuses."

Dan stated, "I'm sure there are some supervisors in our building who are on the level with our time, they are not nefarious in any way—but I don't know where that sheet goes after I clock out at the end of the night.

"You assume in good faith that they are doing what they are supposed to be doing, but there are some weeks that I work every day that week, and I know just by keeping track in my head that I should have had maybe X-amount more dollars that week. Something wasn't right. Fifteen minutes a day would add up to 35, 40, close to an hour that could have been there that week.

"And it doesn't happen anymore, but on Sunday nights we used to have a printed-out sheet with everybody's name and their time for that week so we could check off on it and see if anything was wrong, you could make adjustments and then initial. I haven't seen one of those in at least three years. At least you could double-check.

"A lot of the young men and women who are just starting here, they don't know any better. They have staggered times, too. Say a bunch of people start at 10 o'clock. Well, there's a whole bunch who start at 10:05, 10:10, 10:15 and so on depending on where you are in seniority.

“The start times are also rarely posted on time, and can change at a moment’s notice.

“A lot of those kids, no one ever tells them, ‘Hey, you start at 10, they’re not paying you until 10:10. If you want to give them ten minutes free...’ It’s kind of dirty. They’re not very transparent with how that actually works.”

UPS warehouse workers are overwhelmingly part-time. In the contract talks, Dan noted, “A lot of attention is focused on the day-timers, which includes the drivers. But at night, it’s a totally different demeanor.

“Generally everybody, myself included, has been at work all day, coming from their primary job to work for their supplemental income and the ‘golden handcuffs’ of the benefit package. That’s why they’re there until 2 o’clock in the morning, just to get up again in a few hours and do another job, and come back into UPS.

“I loaded trucks for over a decade, and then a few years ago, they built a new area in the middle of our hub. They used a lot of dead space up toward the ceiling above the motor pool, a whole small-sort area, and when they built that I moved over there. We handle the little envelopes, anything less than seven or eight pounds.

“The way people ship things now is different. If you bought a cell phone, it’s shipped in something really small now, whereas they used to use something the size of a shoe box. Now there’s so much stuff put in plastic. If you buy a dress or a t-shirt, it’s just going to be in a bag. It’s thousands and thousands of things like that.

“It is a physical job. I keep a pedometer on me; I put in at least three miles walking up and down every night. If you’re unloading trucks, that’s brutal on your shoulders and backs. It’s really hot for those guys especially.

“In restaurant work you are on your feet, in the heat. I’m used to a hot environment. UPS is hotter than the kitchen, by far. At UPS you’ve got bay doors that are open and shut, you’ve got trucks coming in and out. If you had AC on, it would be such a waste. But they could do so much better with ventilation.”

UPS was designated by the federal government as an “essential business” with the onset of the COVID pandemic in 2020. Not only did the company see record profits from special contracts with FEMA and other entities to ship personal protective equipment, it has received millions of dollars in CARES Act funds.

“They had to have gotten money to improve ventilation in the building,” Dan noted. “They are a global, multibillion dollar company. They had guys that knew how to work that system for all it was worth.

“Even leaving aside the COVID issue,” he added, “with all the dust in the building you need better airflow.

“It’s a dusty warehouse, lots of cardboard. It’s really dirty. Wearing masks through COVID was fine; if it wasn’t so hot, you would wear them all the time because it’s so dusty, you can just see the particulates in the air.

“The area I work at is elevated above the motor pool and hot air rises. Walking up the steps you can just feel it. If someone is not drinking ounces and ounces of water throughout your shift, you would be in bad shape.”

Access to clean water is an issue at UPS hubs. “With COVID,” Dan said, “they installed touch-free water bottle refilling stations. But the whole thing is filthy. They have some ice machines that hardly ever work. The bathrooms are what you would expect in a high school or something.”

“During COVID, UPS didn’t enforce a mask rule. Yet they gave us a handout to put in our car in case we got pulled over in the middle of the night and asked why we were out so we could say ‘we’re essential employees.’

“We were in there busting our asses and it was as busy as Christmas time. You’re worried you’re going to get sick, am I going to touch something and come home and get my wife sick or give my kid COVID, am I going to get it and then be out of work and not have any income?

“We never saw anything—no bonuses or hazard pay. I’m not an ‘everyone gets a trophy’ kind of guy, but we should have gotten something for that. There could have been some kind of compensation.”

Like many workers, Dan is highly distrustful of the Teamsters bureaucracy. “I don’t trust them as far as I can throw them,” he said. “I would love to know in my heart of hearts that my best interest was theirs, but it’s really not. It’s all about money, for those guys, who have never done what we do. I appreciate the fact that they act like they know what we do, but as long as we pay our dues, that’s what they care about.

“To do this job for \$16 an hour, the benefits outweigh the pay in my mind. That’s kind of a sad state. Someone with a young family, a baby and kids, you put up with a lot not to worry about that one aspect.”

“A strike can be beneficial to some and hurtful to others, but in the long run it will be very much beneficial to our side [the working class]. A strike will shine a light on what people don’t know. People just assume you get your yoga pants and your Lego sets and it just magically happens.

“But there are all these men and women with families busting their asses to make sure that you get those things, as important as medicine or as frivolous as an Apple watch. That’s what we do. We’ll get you your stuff. We’re there at 2 a.m. sweating and doing what we’re supposed to be doing, and we deserve to be compensated for that.”



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