

“It’s basically like slavery, but they’re just paying you a little bit.”

New Orleans UPS workers speak about working conditions ahead of potential strike

Our reporters
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The August 1 contract expiration at UPS for 340,000 workers in the International Brotherhood of Teamsters is now less than three weeks away. Workers have shown their determination to fight by voting 97 percent to authorize strike action. Workers are demanding to win inflation-busting wages, an end to the multi-tier wages system and better working conditions.

The UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee, founded by UPS workers across the US, is determined to prevent another sellout like the one rammed through by the Teamsters bureaucracy in 2018. To do this, they state, requires that workers at every hub and warehouse “organize ourselves—not to ‘support’ the bargaining committee and to cheerlead for them, but to enforce our democratic will, and position ourselves to countermand the inevitable sellout. We must prepare action from below to impose the principle that the will of 340,000 UPS workers takes absolute priority over everything else.”

Earlier this week, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters visited a UPS warehouse in New Orleans, Louisiana and spoke with warehouse workers and delivery drivers about their working conditions and the potential strike.

One warehouse worker said, “I’ve been here a long time and I just feel like the longer you’re here the less the company appreciates you.

“I was here for the pandemic, when they made us come to work and told us they weren’t going to give us hazard pay. I’ve seen things change a lot in this building, for the worse. Throughout the pandemic, people just stopped coming to work. A lot of people quit. We just didn’t feel appreciated, even afterwards, after they worked us umpteen hours a day—they just turned around and said, ‘you know you all have to come to work, we don’t care if you get sick.’ There

was a fight to get gloves and hand sanitizer. It took a while for them to get hand sanitizer stations for us, but half the building was sick by the time we got them.

“This morning, we came in for 5:30 a.m. and it’s 8:16 a.m. We’re supposed to be guaranteed three and a half hours but they work the work from under us. They have supervisors in there working our work before we get to it. We’re not united out here so nothing ever changes or happens. They [the Teamsters] pushed through the last contract, but they don’t even follow that one.”

Inside the warehouse, the worker continued, “It is hot. They try to give us water, but half the fans don’t work. Sometimes the fans don’t work at all. There’s no air conditioning.”

Another part-time worker said, “The conditions in the warehouse can be better. Temperature-wise, not just heat, but even when it’s cold, there’s no insulation. Whatever it is outside, it’s going to be way worse in the building. If it’s super hot outside, it’s going to be 10 times hotter in the building. If it’s cold outside it’s going to be 10 times colder in the building.

“I handle everything we get. I unload and load trucks. It’s blazing hot, and there’s dust everywhere. Working with masks is not mandatory. If you want it you can ask for it. They might not always have them, but you can ask for them. If anything, they should provide eyewear and protective glasses. It’s a whole bunch of dust, debris, chemicals, powder chemicals, not necessarily lab stuff, but sometimes they might have detergent, and if that gets in your eyes, it burns. That got in my eyes a couple of times, and it doesn’t feel good. If that happens, you just go wash it out. They do have some freak accidents.”

Speaking about the company’s opposition to meeting workers’ basic needs, another warehouse worker said, “At the end of the day, I feel like it’s all about numbers. They’re going to do anything to keep their numbers from falling, even if they have to send people home and even if it hurts

me.”

A delivery driver said, “It’s about 120-130 degrees in the trucks, especially when you’re looking for a package, and they have all the packages at the back. UPS has to do lot better. It’s basically like slavery, but they’re just paying you a little bit for it. I feel like they can do a whole lot better than what they’re doing.”

Multiple workers reported that a delivery truck driver had recently died of heat stroke. A warehouse worker learned about the death from other drivers. “The company didn’t tell us, and I didn’t hear anything from the union about it either,” she said. Two drivers confirmed the death. As of this writing, there are no reports in the local news or on the Teamsters Local 270’s website or social media about the death.

This would not be the first heat-related death among UPS drivers. Last year, 24-year-old driver Esteban Chavez Jr. died in California after suffering heat stroke while on his delivery route.

As global temperatures precipitously rise due to climate change, the conditions inside non-air conditioned trucks and warehouses will only grow more dangerous. Throughout June and early July, New Orleans and much of the gulf coast were under a “heat dome,” with the heat-index reaching as high as 115 degrees Fahrenheit (46 degrees Celsius) in the city. At least 13 people in Texas and two in Louisiana were reported to have died as a result.

Faced with unlivable wages and dangerous working conditions, workers voiced their readiness to strike.

“We need it,” said one delivery driver.

A warehouse worker stated, “I think a strike would be a good idea. I think it’s necessary. \$16.50 is all right, but if you’re working three hours a day, who but yourself can you take care of?”

“They’re big on performance. They’ll work the s*** out of you to get the trailers off the dock. I don’t think it should go like that, but it goes like that because the managers get bonuses off of that. We do not. We put in all the labor work, and we get the trucks off the door, but they get paid off of it. Every employee that works in the building should get benefits around the board. Every employee should benefit off of any kind of bonus. If we’re putting in the manpower, we should get a bonus.”

Another driver said he thought that higher wages should be a major focus in a strike, and that the measly \$2.85 wage increase proposed by UPS was inadequate. “I used to be a warehouse worker. Drivers need much higher pay and so do warehouse workers. With inflation, everything is going up.”

When asked about whether the Teamsters officials were communicating with members about the demands they’re putting forward and the status of the negotiations, many

workers stated they had received little information.

A driver said, “We don’t know anything about the contract talks.”

A warehouse worker stated, “Our local has not been informing us about the contract talks. I get emails and stuff from other members of the big union, but not our local. We were calling them during the pandemic about the conditions, or even if I say something about the supervisors working here, or the amount of work we do get or don’t get—we feel like the union doesn’t really care about us.

“People in the building, we don’t get much response from the union unless someone loses their job, and then they come. Other than that, as far as our work conditions and our morale and how we feel, we don’t feel like the union has our back. They’re out of touch. I’ve been telling this to our local for years, but they don’t care. They’re not listening to us. Their attention is elsewhere.”

Another warehouse worker agreed, stating, “I haven’t heard much about the negotiation talks. I don’t even know, as far as what they’re asking for a raise. I don’t know any of the demands. If you go to the Teamsters website, you don’t get much info. I’ll strike if necessary. I want more money. Workers need to make \$20 coming in the door, at least. I’m only working three and a half hours a day. That’s still not even \$400 a week. I have another job, but I don’t want to work two jobs. I want to work one job.”

Speaking about the supposed “victory” claimed by the Teamsters to securing AC in the trucks, which will only go into effect for vehicles purchased in 2024 and after, one driver observed: “The last thing I heard about was the ACs being put in the trucks, but there’s the clause that they’re not going to put them in our trucks that we have right now.”



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