

Illinois and Kentucky UPS workers speak on conditions and approaching strike deadline

Luke Galvin
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The UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee is holding a meeting this Sunday at 6pm eastern to support the fight by 22,000 Yellow freight workers. Register for the event by clicking here.

Take up the fight for rank-and-file control! Join the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee by emailing upsrkandfilecommittee@gmail.com or by filling out the form below.

On Tuesday and Thursday, a team of reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with United Parcel Service (UPS) workers at the Chicago Area Consolidation Hub (CACH) and at the company's Worldport air freight hub in Louisville, Kentucky about the August 1 strike deadline.

These are two of the largest facilities in the United States. UPS employs 12,000 of its 340,000 workers under the Teamsters union at the sprawling Worldport complex. CACH employs 9,000 workers, with other large hubs located throughout the Chicago area.

The Teamsters bureaucracy have pledged to call a strike at UPS if a deal is not in place by August 1. But on Wednesday, they announced that talks with the company would restart next week, after having collapsed on July 5. With General President Sean O'Brien admitting in a recent webinar that the union would not call a strike if a last minute tentative agreement has been reached, the restart of talks represents a last-ditch effort to block a strike and enforce a contract which falls short of workers' demands.

The conditions faced by workers at the facilities are terrible. A part-time worker at WorldPort said, "I have not eaten in two days ... We're just a number in here."

At CACH, one worker said: "Everyone should be able to access PPE; there's a lot of noise in unloading, but only full-time workers with seniority have access to ear protection." A Worldport worker described similar conditions: "There are very loud areas and workers suffer

from hearing loss. Last year, we had a worker who died of a brain aneurysm and would have retired this year. She kept telling her supervisor about bad headaches, but they wouldn't let her retire early. She was walking and she was dead before she hit the floor."

"They also have us packing the trucks too full," he continued. "They just pull down the door and send them out with the drivers shaking the truck, making loose packages fall down. That means the guys unloading it can have boxes fall on them. They've got 21-year-old supervisors in there because of the high turnover rate, and they don't know how to turn off the belts and other basic safety measures."

During the summer, the heat reaches dangerous levels in the facilities, which lack adequate fans and air conditioning. Many spoke about excessive temperatures. One worker at CACH said, "We get two 10-minute breaks from the heat—that's hardly enough because the fans barely reach our area."

A Worldport worker said: "We need more fans ... it's too hot in there." Another worker said, "It's 90 degrees or higher in there and the supervisors are forcing us to stay in the trailers. They [management] also 'forget' about our breaks ... Only half the fans and water coolers are working. It took five years to get one fan fixed. If you go outside to get a break, the supervisors tell you to come back in."

Dana, another worker at Worldport, said many fans were in disrepair this summer and stopped working. "It took them a month to fix them" amid sweltering temperatures. "I heard truck drivers don't have any air conditioning either. When workers brought in spark plugs to attempt to fix the air conditioning in the trucks, UPS fired them for 'tampering with machinery.'"

Across the board, workers at UPS are working poverty wages at limited hours. Many younger workers said they work second jobs and still struggle to make ends meet. "I

bring home around \$200 a week, and maybe \$340 if I get more hours,” a Worldport worker said. “My car insurance is \$250 a month. My phone bill is \$80. Now I’ve got to pay \$300 to the vet to get shots for my dog. I want to earn enough to cover my bills and live a decent life.”

“If they keep hours the same, we need wages to go up by several dollars; if they keep wages the same, we need hours to increase a lot because the current [pay] situation is unlivable,” another worker said.

A Worldport worker said: “I’ve been here 17 years, and I’m only making a few bucks more an hour than new hires.” Another worker with 18 years at UPS said she only makes \$4 more than the new hires.

While the current contract with UPS officially provides a mere 33 cents an hour for the cost of living adjustments (COLA) to counteract the effect of inflation, workers claimed they had yet to receive any since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic despite historic levels of inflation. Alex, a young female worker at Worldport, explained that UPS refused to provide COLA wage increases after raising wages by \$4 following the onset of the pandemic in 2020.

A marginal increase in pay during the pandemic expired with the ending of lockdowns and all measures to halt the spread of COVID. A young worker at CACH described his experience in 2020: “I worked in a local hotel, but I got furloughed when the COVID pandemic started. I couldn’t get back in there so I took this job because I got three kids to feed. I was making \$400 a week as a re-taper because I could make \$40.00 an hour if I worked Fridays, but now with the schedules changed from Sunday to Thursday I’m only making \$280 a week—that’s a huge cut. That’s why I voted to strike.”

The Teamsters bureaucracy has intentionally suppressed information about the status of contract talks. When asked about their feelings toward the upcoming contract struggle, many younger workers at CACH expressed confusion, noting the Teamsters never notified them and hadn’t explained the process of conducting a strike.

However, there is an overwhelming pro-strike sentiment. Tevon, a loader/unloader with under a year at CACH, said: “A lot of times big companies look down on the little guys, but this time we really mean it and we want it. I one hundred percent support the strike.” Workers at Worldport shared this sentiment, with one worker stating, “We need to strike.”

Workers expressed broad agreement with the founding statement of the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which the team distributed to workers. That statement

declared:

Everything indicates that despite the public rhetoric, we are dealing with the same old Teamsters bureaucracy which violates our rights and enforces sellouts. The only response must be to 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.

In founding the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee, we are taking the first step in that organizing. We call upon our coworkers to join us and build up a powerful network linking rank-and-file workers at every hub and location across the United States. This broadly democratic structure, controlled by workers ourselves and not the union apparatus, will provide us with means to share the information which is being withheld from us, to freely discuss strategy and to coordinate joint actions across the country.

Workers at CACH stressed that they wanted to link up UPS workers with other workers already on strike. Tevon said, “I support all the strikes, I support everybody that’s striking because if you don’t strike we get run over.”

“If we could hook up with the actors’ and writers’ strikes—that’d put us in a powerful position,” a young CACH worker said. “You got all these people just re-upped their Netflix account who log on and Netflix is running stuff from like the 1980s—they are not happy.”

To autoworkers, whose contract expires in two months, Tevon said, “My only message to autoworkers is: do not fold; if you fold, you’ll regret it for years to come.”



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