

Teamsters announce sellout deal at UPS to block strike by 340,000 workers

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Tuesday’s announcement of a tentative agreement between the Teamsters union and UPS opens up a new stage in the struggle of 340,000 UPS workers. For months, the Teamsters bureaucracy under General President Sean O’Brien pledged thousands of times to call a national strike if a new deal was not in place by August 1. But the announcement of a tentative agreement—one week before the deadline and only hours after talks restarted following a three-week pause—has exposed this as a massive bait-and-switch campaign.

In general, how loudly the union apparatus declares an agreement “historic,” as well as the number of pro-corporate Democrats “congratulating” workers on the deal (which yesterday included Nancy Pelosi, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and others who voted last year to ban a rail strike), is directly related to the scale of the sellout. Moreover, what is left out of the “highlights” is always as revealing as what is included. The details that have emerged, in any case, make clear that the agreement is “historic” only as a naked sellout. These include:

Starting wages for part-timers, who make up two-thirds of the workforce, will increase from \$15.50 per hour to \$21, rising to \$23 over the five years of the contract. But \$15.50 is so low that UPS has already been compelled to raise wages around the country to attract enough workers, and many already make more than \$21 per hour. With a working day that lasts only 3 to 4 hours for most, this will keep the vast majority of the workforce mired in poverty. Part-timers at the company’s massive and modern Worldport freight hub in Louisville, Kentucky report having to live three to an apartment and even go without eating to try to make ends meet.

Significantly, the highlights say nothing about pensions or healthcare. An email bulletin sent by the Teamsters to UPS workers alleged unspecified “major increases” to the IBT-

UPS Pension Plan, which covers workers in 22 states. But it said nothing about pensions for workers in the country’s other 28 states. Unconfirmed reports to the WSWS suggested at least some other regions may not have received any increase in pension payments at all, and only minimal increases to healthcare.

The contract will create 7,500 new full-time positions, next to nothing for a company with nearly 200,000 part-timers, some of whom have waited decades to move up to full-time status.

- Existing full- and part-time workers will receive a \$7.50 per hour wage increase over the life of the five-year contract. For drivers, whose wages have already been eaten up by inflation, this amounts to a pathetic 15 percent increase by 2028, amounting to a substantial further cut in real wages.

- An agreement to include air conditioning in all *new* vehicles will leave drivers without AC into the 2040s, given that UPS keeps trucks in operation for 25 years or more.

The contract also continues the use of Uber-style “personal vehicle drivers” during peak seasons, exploiting the economic desperation of part-timers by giving them eight hours of work a day. This is the thin end of the wedge of suppressing wages for full-time drivers or getting rid of them entirely.

From now on, the fight by UPS workers will take the form of an open conflict against the Teamsters apparatus. Workers cannot afford to be extras in a bureaucratically controlled, made-for-TV “contract campaign.” They must organize themselves to defeat this sellout contract and wrest control out of the hands of the union apparatus. This means the building of the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee, founded earlier this month, as the organizing center of opposition on the shop floor.

The fight at UPS must be based on drawing the lessons of the experience through which workers have passed. The bureaucracy in the Teamsters and in the other unions have spent decades enforcing massive sellouts, while driving strike activity to near zero. It is highly revealing that the Teamsters’ most prominent boast about the deal is that it has

“succeeded” in raising UPS workers’ nominal wages to slightly above the \$19-per-hour starting rate at non-union Amazon. This is the result of decades of betrayals by the union bureaucracy, particularly since the mid-1970s, when part-timers were first introduced.

Now, driven by intolerable conditions, the biggest upsurge of the working class in decades is underway. This has seriously challenged the ability of the bureaucracy, which is hated and distrusted by workers, to play its appointed role of ramming through sellouts. This is shown, for example, in the simultaneous strikes by TV and film writers and actors, the first in more than 60 years.

The bogus “Strike Ready” campaign at UPS was designed from the start as a means of getting out in front of rank-and-file anger, while the bureaucrats worked behind the scenes to engineer yet another betrayal. They were advised in this role by the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), *Labor Notes*, the Democratic Socialists of America and other pseudo-left groups, all of which have spent decades promoting the fiction of self-reform of the bureaucracy through cosmetic changes at the top.

All of these groups have spent years recasting O’Brien, a notorious thug and enforcer for the last Teamsters president, James P. Hoffa, who played a leading role in the 2013 UPS sellout contract, as a “militant” union leader. This paved the way for O’Brien’s election as general president in 2021, albeit amid the lowest turnout in the history of direct union elections (a mark beaten last year by the 9 percent turnout in the United Auto Workers election). In exchange, the TDU, the DSA and others have received lucrative posts in the top echelons of the apparatus as PR managers.

In the final weeks before the TA was announced, the TDU even quietly shelved its “demand” for \$25 starting pay for part-timers and privately informed its supporters that the proposal was “dead.” This did not prevent Sean Orr, a member of the DSA and the TDU Steering Committee, from declaring the deal announced by O’Brien a great victory that was the product of the rank-and-file “[changing] the leadership of our union two years ago.”

What is taking place at UPS is not just a contract fight. It is part of a larger political struggle. Behind O’Brien and UPS stand the Biden administration and both big business parties.

The real author of the tentative agreement is not to be found in the bargaining room in Washington D.C., but a short distance away in the White House. By drawing together with the union bureaucracy, Biden hopes to strangle the growing strike movement and impose cuts in real wages, in order both to prop up Wall Street and to prepare the “home front” for World War III against Russia and China.

This strategy has played out again and again, including last month on the docks, last year on the railroads and in the oil

refineries, and at freight companies such as Yellow, where the Teamsters canceled a strike at the last minute over the weekend. Biden, the strike-breaker-in-chief, met regularly with O’Brien in the lead-up to the UPS sellout as well as last year when he was preparing to ban a strike by railroad workers.

Almost identical methods are being used to try to block a strike at the Big Three automakers: the promotion of long-time bureaucrat Shawn Fain as a “reform” president, the elevation of the pseudo-left Unite All Workers for Democracy faction into top posts, and close collaboration between Fain and the White House, screened behind “radical”-sounding public statements by the union aimed at confusing the workers.

What are the conclusions workers must draw?

First: as long as things remain in the hands of the union apparatus, regardless of who is leading it or what it publicly claims, the *only possible outcome* is a sellout. But if workers organize themselves, develop alternative structures which they control, and struggle to transfer power from the apparatus to the rank and file, they will then create the means through which they can fight the union-management-government conspiracy against them.

The UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee, part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, must be developed as the organizational spearhead for a movement to reject the sellout agreement and fight for the transfer of power from the apparatus to the rank and file.

UPS workers have the most powerful allies on Earth: the international working class. Workers everywhere are closely following the situation at UPS and want to unite with UPS workers, because they know this is a critical battle whose outcome will affect the class struggle as a whole. By uniting with workers in other companies and industries, where they are facing the same betrayals, UPS workers will find the strength they need to defeat this tentative agreement.

But above all, the struggle at UPS raises fundamental questions of class rule. Workers are not just fighting against a greedy company, but an entire social system, capitalism, which can only continue to exist through intensified exploitation and through world war. In response, workers must take up the fight for socialism, that is, the reorganization of society to abolish the profit motive and run the world on the basis of human need, not private profit.



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