

“We need to organize for a strike”: UPS worker campaigning against new contract speaks out

Tom Hall
1 August 2023

Work at UPS? Tell us what you think about the tentative agreement by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Take up the fight against the contract and the sellout union bureaucrats by joining the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee. To contact the committee, email upsrankandfilecommittee@gmail.com.

The World Socialist Web Site recently interviewed a worker from the UPS Swan Island hub in Portland, Oregon, about the new sellout tentative agreement. He and a group of his co-workers have been campaigning vigorously against the deal since shortly after it was announced last week. The interview has been edited for clarity.

* * *

WSWS: *What was the reaction of you and your coworkers to the tentative agreement?*

UPS worker: When it first came out, I was relieved because, to be honest, I was worried about losing my health insurance during a strike. But the next day, when it was put on the Teamsters app along with the wage schedule, I was devastated. I was shocked at how bad it was. This proposal was shocking, and people had a lot of questions. In particular, there was confusion about whether our Market Rate Adjustments [under which the company raises starting pay at a particular location above the contractual level to attract enough workers] would be in place and protected.

They are hemming and hawing. But it isn't protected. When you cut through the BS and look at the language, the general wage increases, the so-called “raises” just mean that our pay cut will be less than when they take the MRA away. I passed that info out to my coworkers and every part-timer I've spoken to, everyone between zero and nine years' seniority especially is outraged. There are a few people trying to sell it because they are stewards, or they are connected with the stewards. Their response to other folks was that “we have to sacrifice ourselves to the greater good.”

WSWS: *What does that mean?*

Worker: I have no idea. Another line is that it's good for “Middle America,” and you have to think about the bigger picture. What I've been telling my coworkers while campaigning is, those words don't pay your rent, do they? And they say, of course not.

The major issue is getting information out, because there's major pressure on the stewards to present this as the greatest thing ever. People can't even get the app to work, but once they get the numbers, they're sad.

Then I say, call the local and make sure your address is correct. Because they will mail out voting links.

WSWS: *Can you speak more about workers' concerns about the integrity of the vote?*

Worker: My understanding is that—and the transparency is as clear as mud—ballot codes will be mailed out on the 2nd or 3rd. Everyone gets a unique code coded to that member, and then you put in the URL and type your code in. Then you can vote “yes” or “no.”

The big thing here are the concerns about electronic voting and even making sure they're receiving the URLs in the first place. I know you've covered this about the UAW election on the WSWS.

So we're hammering home this week, making sure that people have their information up to date. They don't necessarily have that up to date if they're part-time, and they're in an unstable living situation. It's very important to get that out. You sign union cards when you're hired, in which you fill out your address. But you may not have updated that in years, and if you're on poverty wages you're likely not in the same place.

The WSWS can have a really big role in making sure that people call their locals and make sure their information is correct.

This campaign, “vote no,” can definitely win if we turn out the votes. The deal is so awful it sells the no vote itself. It's a matter of mobilization and raising class consciousness.

Part of the meeting [of the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee] did that for me as well, which I appreciated.

We're starting to see an alternative to this system. It's hard to see that there's an alternative, and then when we can see it, that's when people say, let's do this! We can do this, and we have a plan to do it.

People are sad and angry when they see the numbers. And disappointed. There was one co-worker who even started crying. A lot of people believed that PR stuff, and I wanted to believe it too, that we're not going to leave anybody behind, that part-time doesn't work, etc. A lot of people are devastated, angry and looking to act. And not just voting no, but building an independent system away from the bureaucrats, who are an extension of the corporations.

WSWS: *What have you been doing at your hub to organize against the contract?*

Worker: The day after, two days after, we immediately started tabling "vote no" with the wage schedule. We created a flyer that was sent around. These are part-time UPSers. We've got unloaders, loaders, sorters. In terms of organization, we're hitting both gates of the building.

This is one of the oldest UPS facilities in the country. Swan Island was expanded in 2010, and only our small services are automated. Everything else is manual. There are probably, depending on the time of year, around 250 per shift and four shifts. So it's about 1,000 workers. That doesn't even include the drivers, about 100 of them. Between day, twilight night and preload you're looking at 150-250 per each shift, plus more during peak season.

WSWS: *The Swan Island area looks like a major logistics hub in general.*

Worker: Yeah. It's a major hub. Yellow is there, they're Teamsters, at least for now. There is Sysco. If you go up the map, up the peninsula this is a historically black neighborhood with heavy industry. There is a huge, huge Amazon facility. It's not on Swan Island but nearby.

One of the main reasons our wages have gone up is because they're competing with Amazon. They start out at over \$22. They try to stay just above Amazon in pay because we also pay dues.

The wait time at my hub to get to a full-time inside job is nine years. It's even worse in Worldport [the company's air freight hub in Louisville, Kentucky] because of automation. You may as well basically retire or find another job.

The attrition rate is huge. I don't know the exact rate, but the union's numbers, there are 108,000 with zero to five years seniority and that drops down to 19,000 for workers with five to 10 years. But you don't get vested into your pension until five years. So they're paying into pensions that they'll never have access to. These people are getting circulated in and out. They are just subsidizing the fund.

WSWS: *What do you think about the freeze to pension contributions?*

Worker: I think what's going to happen is that, it's not like one pension will give money to another. But UPS will reduce its contributions to give it to an ailing pension. So you should basically call it that. That's our money. Folks are angry about that. It's not going to fly if our contributions are reduced.

And the pensions don't keep up with inflation. If you reach top rate and retire, your pension should be 75 percent of what your earnings were. And it won't be that for full- or part-time. You won't have enough to live off of in your old age. It should be 75 to 100 percent of what you were making when you retire. It'll be 50 percent if you're part-time and 60 percent if you're full-time. So even the increases aren't bringing you up to your working earning when you retire.

WSWS: *What do you think about starting pay?*

Worker: We've been consistently calling for \$25 an hour. The campaign now is \$25 to survive. That's because that's what the starting rate was in 1982, adjusted for inflation. But if you take it back to the 1970s it's even higher. It's remarkable. It shows us how we've been sold out. I mean, \$25 is just a minimum. If the starting rate was \$37 then [in today's dollars]—well, they can do that, but they don't want to.

If we vote this down, we need to go on strike immediately. Vote no and prepare for a strike. We have to push for a strike. I don't even want to talk about [Teamsters General President] Sean O'Brien. We're going to strike. We need to organize for a strike. That's the next step.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact