

Who is counting the ballots in the UPS contract vote?

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Voting begins today for 340,000 UPS workers in the United States on a five-year tentative agreement. It will continue through August 22.

The agreement is a massive sellout, containing substandard pay increases, freezes to pension contribution increases and other concessions. There is growing opposition from the rank and file to the deal, which was brought by the union bureaucracy only one week before an August 1 strike deadline. The announcement was designed to block a strike that would embolden workers at UPS and around the country and undermine the position of the union apparatus, which is joined at the hip with management and the government.

Around the country, workers are mobilizing to urge each other to vote “no” by the widest possible margins. This is a welcome and healthy sentiment. But a crucial and pressing issue is that the rank and file must organize to ensure the integrity of the vote itself.

The Teamsters bureaucrats and their cheerleaders cynically claim that workers “will have the say.” But as long as matters remain in the hands of the apparatus, this is not true. If it were, the tentative agreement, which was worked out in closed-door talks behind a screen of lies, would never have been brought to a vote in the first place.

This has also been proven repeatedly by the actions of the bureaucracy itself, which has shown that it will stop at nothing to override the will of the rank and file. UPS workers bitterly remember that in 2018 the Teamsters overrode a majority “no” vote and imposed the current contract by the reactionary “two-thirds” rule. Later that year, the union responded to a “no” vote at UPS freight by forcing workers to vote again on the same deal.

The union was compelled to finally abolish that loophole afterwards, but it was only one of countless ways in which the apparatus systematically violates workers’ democratic right to vote in a meaningful election. Indeed, the strike authorization vote this summer was conducted in a rapid and sloppy fashion in order to deliberately suppress turnout and prevent it from becoming a rallying point for rank-and-file opposition.

Mailing system makes it possible that tens of thousands won’t be able to vote

The voting for the contract will take place online. However, each member will be mailed a paper document containing a unique QR code and URL, which they then have to use to access the voting website on their computer.

This should raise alarm bells. The needless step of mailing a paper document enables the bureaucracy to suppress turnout. “The big thing here are the concerns about electronic voting and even making sure they’re receiving the URLs in the first place,” one UPS worker warned recently.

“[Workers] don’t necessarily have [their mailing information] up to date [with the union] if they’re part-time, and they’re in an unstable living situation. ... 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.”

As a matter of fact, this is the exact method that the United Auto Workers used to suppress voter turnout in its presidential election last year. Hundreds of thousands of eligible voters never received ballots, and more ballots were returned as “undeliverable” than were actually cast. Meanwhile, an email system used to send candidate statements to voters included only a small percentage of UAW members.

The result was that Shawn Fain, a career official who, like Teamsters General President Sean O’Brien, was recast as a “reformer” just in time for his election, won the vote on a 9 percent turnout, the lowest ever in the history of union elections. (The second lowest was the 2021 Teamsters election won by O’Brien, at 12.9 percent.)

The reason they suppressed the turnout was because Will Lehman, a rank-and-file autoworker from Macungie, Pennsylvania, was running in the election on a socialist program, calling for the abolition, not the reform of the union bureaucracy. They were determined to prevent this campaign, which threatened the material and the social interests of the apparatus, from winning a significant hearing among the rank and file. Will Lehman has a lawsuit pending currently against the Department of Labor over the voting irregularities demanding a rerun of the election.

The lessons of the railroads

Ballot fraud was a major issue in the railroad struggle last year—where nearly half of Class I railroad workers are Teamsters members. Like the UPS contract, a deal was announced shortly before a strike deadline and hailed as “historic” by the bureaucracy and the corporate press. But railroaders were furious when they read the deal, which did not even include any paid time off, among other concessions.

Substantial evidence of ballot fraud emerged among the 12 unions that voted on the deal. The best documented was in the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), which claimed the deal was narrowly ratified by 150 votes. In fact, more ballots were marked “undeliverable” or “questionable” in the final tally than the margin of victory.

But this was only a small indication of systematic disfranchisement by the union. A poll of union members conducted by the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee (RWRFC) found that 46 percent of respondents either never received a ballot or did not receive it in time to cast a ballot. Nearly 90 percent said that they felt the vote was not conducted honestly, and 93 percent supported a revote. The IBEW itself was forced to admit the irregularities, which it blamed on the third-party contractor overseeing the vote. But, having secured the result it wanted, it refused to allow a revote.

Other rail unions were more open and shameless, simply declaring that the contract had “passed” without even giving a vote breakdown. The president of the National Conference of Firemen and Oilers, when pressed for vote totals by a WSWs reporter, accused him of “[interfering] in the business of my organization.”

At some unions, opposition was so great that they were unable to manufacture “yes” votes. This included the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED), which is a part of the Teamsters. However, instead of honoring a near-unanimous strike vote, the Teamsters then delayed continuously for months, stringing workers out on endless “status quo” extensions. Meanwhile, BMWED President Tony Cardwell furiously lashed out at the RWRFC, which was organizing workers’ opposition to the contract.

The transparent aim of these delays was to buy time for Congress to ban a strike. The BMWED even pegged the end of its “extension” to five days after Congress reconvened after the November midterm elections. Then, at the request of the White House, they delayed even longer when the midterm elections produced a tightly contested result.

General President O’Brien himself was centrally involved in the campaign to ram through the sellout. He met with the White House several times at key moments and was personally involved in the White House-brokered contract talks. At the convention for the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (which is also part of the Teamsters) last fall, O’Brien admonished workers not to air their “dirty laundry” to “outsiders”—that is, not to speak out publicly against the contract. That convention was a gathering on the Las Vegas Strip, addressed by Labor Secretary Marty

Walsh, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other politicians who were actively preparing to ban a rail strike.

For rank-and-file oversight of the contract vote!

This experience proves that a “no” vote at UPS will not convince O’Brien and the bureaucracy to come back with a better contract, as some pseudo-left groups are claiming. They are hostile to the workers they claim to represent, and no amount of “pressure” can change that. Instead, workers have to organize themselves to take control of the vote and defeat any attempt to stuff the ballot.

A series of local informational meetings is taking place over the next several days. At these meetings, workers should take control of the meeting and elect a rank-and-file oversight committee, made up of trusted co-workers from the shop floor, with no connection to the union bureaucracy to oversee balloting at each local.

These committees would be tasked with making sure every single member is able to vote without complication or delay and to verify that their vote has been counted. Workers should select a national oversight committee, again consisting solely of trusted workers and not union officials, and empower it to oversee the tabulation of the votes at the national level.

Any signs of irregularities must be documented and exposed before a national audience as widely as possible. Workers should agree among themselves that they reserve the right to take any appropriate action against any attempt by the bureaucracy to block oversight or violate workers’ right to vote in a *meaningful* election.

That means not only direct ballot fraud, but any attempt to ignore or override the will of the rank and file through “revotes,” contract extensions, “cooling off” periods, et cetera. If workers choose to vote down the contract, the only legitimate response is an immediate strike.

Without real rank-and-file control, as long as the bureaucracy is free to try to engineer the result that they want, the vote cannot be considered a free and fair election.

The building up of new democratic structures is the goal of the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee. To join, or for more information, fill out the form below or email upsrangandfilecommittee@gmail.com.



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