

# UPS contract declared ratified under cloud of suspicion among the rank and file

Tom Hall  
24 August 2023

The announcement Tuesday of the passage of a new national contract at UPS is a further lesson for workers in the character of the trade union bureaucracy.

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters claimed the new five-year deal covering 340,000 workers was the best in the company's history. In fact, it is a pro-company sellout which the union bureaucrats imposed on behalf of both management and the White House.

It provides wages below the level demanded by part-timers, freezes the company's pension contributions in many areas of the country, and adds only 7,500 new full-time jobs over five years. The Teamsters bureaucracy spent enormous sums of money on a propaganda campaign promoting distortions and half-truths, such as its claim that wages would "double" over the life of the contract for some delivery drivers. The much-vaunted starting wage of \$21 per hour for part-timers—who make up two-thirds of the workforce—will leave part-timers in poverty, and will largely be cancelled out by the fact that many already make that much or more due to Market Rate Adjustments (MRA).

Every time the bureaucrats in any trade union announce a sellout deal, they claim that workers "will have the final say." In fact, the entire process through which the contract is worked out and passed makes a mockery of workers' democratic rights. The UPS sellout is no exception.

For months, the Teamsters bureaucracy used a "strike-ready" campaign to present a pro-company contract, already worked out in advance with UPS management, as the product of rank-and-file pressure and a "credible strike threat." The talks were conducted with the close involvement of the Biden administration.

One gets the sense that the ruling class is attempting, in particular, to clear the decks in advance of next month's contract for 150,000 autoworkers, under conditions where the United Auto Workers (UAW) is deeply discredited and the organization of rank-and-file opposition is more advanced than in any other industry.

Last week, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) suddenly held a snap vote on a contract brokered by the White House. The vote came more than two months after the deal had been announced, while the more than 20,000 West Coast dockworkers were kept totally in the dark.

Attempts to shut down the months-long strikes by 76,000 writers and actors in the TV and film industries are ongoing.

For UPS workers, the Teamsters' claim that the contract passed by an 86 percent margin and in every single region of the country

save for one small Florida call center is simply not credible, given the widespread opposition that existed to the deal. In a departure from past practice, the union did not release any breakdown of the vote by local (although it did release vote results by regional supplemental), following a pattern set in other votes this year at trucking firms ABF and TForce.

An online webinar on the results Tuesday night with General President Sean O'Brien lasted just three minutes. One would have expected O'Brien, who claimed to have just passed the richest contract in UPS history in a landslide vote, to take the opportunity to make a high-profile victory lap. But he evidently did not want to take questions or even speak at length on the deal.

There were huge vulnerabilities in the manner in which the vote was conducted. Under the online system, workers could change their vote as many times as they wanted. In addition, anyone who had access to a QR code mailed out to workers by the Teamsters could have changed the vote. Given that confirmations were not sent out to voters via text or email, this made it possible for workers' votes to have been changed by a third party without their knowledge.

Turnout at the end of the voting, which had stayed level at around 35 percent, suddenly jumped by around 20 points during the final weekend, going from one of the lowest turnouts for a UPS contract vote in recent history to the highest. This spike raised eyebrows among many workers.

"If you hadn't already voted by the first couple of weeks, that voting packet you received in the mail is already in the garbage can," one worker said.

Workers are fully justified in demanding, at the very least, a full accounting of the vote. The Teamsters union, which overrode a "no" vote in the last UPS contract in 2018, is no stranger to sham elections. Moreover, there have been a number of politically sensitive union votes in the past several months where significant voting irregularities occurred, including the leadership election for the United Auto Workers and the contract votes in the railroad unions last year.

But even for many workers who may have voted yes, this was not a vote of confidence in the bureaucracy. Many voted "yes" because they had no confidence in the willingness of the union to organize a fight. The same bureaucrats who had claimed before the tentative agreement to be organizing a "credible threat" to strike reversed themselves by 180 degrees and began threatening workers with economic destitution if they voted down the deal and

went on strike.

Many more workers may have voted yes on the basis of lying claims about the deal made by the Teamsters bureaucracy. They will rapidly discover that they have been sold a bill of goods when promised wage and pension increases, air conditioning for vehicles and other improvements never materialize.

The experience at UPS is part of a universal phenomenon. The more determined workers are to fight, the more openly and shamelessly the union bureaucracy moves to suppress them. In Britain, when Royal Mail workers fought this year against sweeping concessions in a new contract, the Communication Workers Union rammed through the unpopular deal by means of endless delays and by making clear it would do everything it could to prevent a serious fight.

In the auto industry, where contracts covering 150,000 workers expire next month, new United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain is using the same playbook as that established by the Teamsters, striking a theatrical posture of militancy, despite having sold out this summer's strike by Clarios battery workers, in order to frame the pro-company contract being cooked up as "historic."

The entire experience demonstrates that the bureaucracy is impervious to "pressure" from below. Instead, workers have to organize a rebellion against the apparatus in the Teamsters and the other trade unions and develop rank-and-file structures that return control to the shop floor, where it belongs.

Workers took significant steps in developing that rebellion during the contract struggle through the formation of the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee. Such committees are being built up all over the world, including among autoworkers, Royal Mail workers, and American, Canadian and German rail workers. These committees are united under the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The "ratification" sets up the next stage in the fight of the rank and file against the bureaucracy. A central feature of this new stage will be the systematic exposure of this contract and the methods employed to ram it through. Both as a matter of law and as a general principle, workers cannot be considered bound by a contract that was forced on them through lies and fraud.

But workers are also in a political struggle against the capitalist government and the corporate-controlled parties. The UPS contract is not just a sellout—it is state policy. The Biden administration is using the union bureaucracy to enforce substandard contracts, prevent or limit strikes, and discipline workers who man US supply chains as American imperialism barrels towards world war. It is a continuation of the policy that led to the strike ban on the railroads last year, in which O'Brien and the Teamsters bureaucrats played a central role.

Pseudo-left groups like the Democratic Socialists of America were brought in to bolster the flagging credibility of the perpetrators of this conspiracy. The support of the DSA and the Teamsters for a Democratic Union "reform" faction for the elevation of O'Brien to the union's top post, as well as their propaganda role in promoting the contract, is the tip of the spear of their intervention in the crisis of the bureaucracy.

Many DSA members rode this and similar campaigns in other

unions into top offices within the bureaucracy. Their deep integration into the apparatus was exposed by not only their promotion of the Teamsters' propaganda lies about the contract, but by their hatred and terror over the growth of organized, independent opposition from below, especially the formation of the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee.

Almost immediately after the results were announced, the DSA rushed to take credit for the contract, bragging that it was the result of "our Strike Ready campaign" which "engaged over 100 [DSA] chapters." Saying perhaps more than it intended, the DSA added: "It was our largest national campaign since Bernie 2020," referring to its endorsement of Bernie Sanders' presidential primary campaign, which was used to funnel support behind Biden in the general election. The pro-capitalist, anti-worker politics of both the DSA and Sanders was exposed last year when both played key roles in the strike ban against the railroaders.

Its identification with the UPS contract will only further discredit the DSA, which is already mired in crisis. The DSA is so openly identified with the Democrats and the union bureaucracy that other pseudo-left groups organized a second line of defense against a rebellion from below at UPS, telling workers that a "no" vote would convince the Teamsters to go back and get a better deal.

But while the pseudo-left has plunged deeper into crisis, the authority of the *World Socialist Web Site* has grown significantly among UPS workers. This is an expression of the growing radicalization in the American working class. The "ratification" has only produced even greater interest in the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee.

The growth of the class struggle is the product the crisis and breakdown of American and world capitalism. Workers throughout the world are being compelled to fight by a situation in which it is increasingly impossible for them to make ends meet, and these struggles are becoming more radicalized the more the governments, the corporations and their union lackeys make clear that they will not accept even modest concessions to workers. This process has deep historical roots and is more powerful than the shabby maneuvering by isolated and despised bureaucrats and politicians.

But to be successful, this struggle must become organized, directed and politically conscious. That is the most important lesson of the struggle at UPS.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**