

1,100 DHL Express workers launch strike at Global Superhub at Cincinnati airport

Tom Hall

7 December 2023

Work at DHL, UPS or another logistics company? Tell us what you think about the strike. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

With the busy holiday season underway, around 1,100 workers at global logistics firm DHL launched a strike at the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport (CVG) Thursday. The workers, members of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, load and unload planes for the DHL Express brand. They voted earlier to authorize strike action by 98 percent, in a sign of their determination to win their demands.

DHL Express' hub in Cincinnati is one of only three "Global Superhubs" in its network, and the only one in the western hemisphere. The roughly 4,000 workers in the hub (outside of the 1,100 airplane loaders, the facility is mostly non-union) handle approximately 350,000 packages a day. In July, the company announced an additional \$192 million in investments at the facility.

Both the timing of the strike during the holiday peak season as well as the strategic significance of the facility creates the potential for a massive struggle to bring DHL and other logistics companies to their knees. The CVG facility is also in the middle of a region of the US stretching from Memphis in southwestern Tennessee to Kentucky and Southern Ohio, towards Chattanooga and Knoxville in eastern Tennessee, which is a critical hub for air cargo operations for Fedex, UPS, the US Postal Service and others.

At UPS, the Teamsters were also compelled to threaten to launch strikes at the Louisville Centennial ground hub, which employs 2,000 workers, over the firing of dozens of specialists and administrative workers who recently joined the union.

Such a struggle, however, requires the rank and file organize themselves independently of the union apparatus, taking the initiative out of pro-corporate union officials' hands and organizing joint actions with workers at other facilities.

Workers at the facility voted by a wide margin to join the Teamsters in April; the Teamsters covers approximately

6,000 DHL workers across the United States. The DHL Group has more than 600,000 workers across the globe, including hundreds of thousands of workers at Deutsche Post, the German post office, which was privatized in the late 1990s.

The Cincinnati workers are fighting against terrible working conditions. Last year, there were 22 injuries at the facility requiring hospitalization, according to the Teamsters. Poor lighting at the facility is a particular concern. According to a Change.org petition started by workers: "We are forced to work in the dark with no lighting as we unload planes and tug them on busy taxiways. We often resort to using our cell phone lights. Out of desperation, we have been asked to seek out non-DHL equipment like headlamps in order to complete our work safely."

"Exhaust fumes leak into tug cabs," the petition continues. "Some tugs have no pry bar or dolly hitch. Staff have had injuries like smashed fingers as a result. Engine covers fly open due to faulty latches leading to potential catastrophes.

"Equipment is so poorly maintained that there is [a] free-for-all at the start of shifts among staff trying to get the working equipment. DHL consistently disregards or encourages employees to violate its own policy regarding safety and communication among crews pushing out planes. We often do not have the minimally required number of headsets for crews to communicate with our colleagues or the pilots. Some crews do not have headsets at all. Those headsets that do exist are often dysfunctional."

Workers at the facility also make as low as \$20 an hour, significantly less than other DHL workers.

Workers have faced total intransigence from management, which retaliated against those involved in the unionization campaign. In anticipation of the strike, the company had already begun re-routing packages to other facilities and is using other DHL employees as scabs. The next contract talks are reportedly not scheduled until January.

The fact that the Teamsters were compelled to call a strike is an indication of the intense anger of the rank and file. It is common for workers who join a union to not see their first

contract for years, with the union bureaucracy keeping them on the job while it carries out behind-the-scenes overtures to management for a deal which secures the interests of the apparatus while doing nothing to improve the conditions of workers. For example, the Amazon Labor Union still does not have a contract with the online retail giant more than a year and a half since it won a unionization vote at the JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island in New York City.

The Teamsters bureaucracy evidently felt that further delays were impossible given the heightened expectations of DHL workers, who joined the Teamsters fully expecting it to organize a struggle. Strike pay has been set at \$650 per week, or around three-quarters of normal wages, assuming \$20 per hour at 40 hours a week.

However, the Teamsters bureaucracy has no strategy for victory. It will seek to isolate the strike and ultimately impose a deal favorable to the company. The union has done nothing to block the continued operation of the facility using scab labor or halt the redirecting of shipments to other facilities. Because of this, analysts expect that the strike will likely not have a significant impact on DHL deliveries.

The experience earlier this year at UPS is a serious warning to DHL workers. The Teamsters bureaucracy, under new president Sean O'Brien, falsely claimed for months that it was preparing for a national strike at the company, where it has 340,000 members. This was done to package the eventual sellout as an "historic" deal which was produced through a "credible strike threat." In reality, it does nothing to change the poverty conditions which the Teamsters have jointly overseen at UPS for decades.

O'Brien was put forward in the union's 2021 leadership election as a reformer who would break with the gangster methods of his predecessor James Hoffa. In reality, O'Brien was a top Hoffa lieutenant who broke with him only to pave the way for his own election campaign. O'Brien was instrumental in delaying a national railroad strike last year long enough for Biden and Congress to preemptively ban it. To recast himself as a militant workers' leader he has relied heavily on Teamsters for a Democratic Union, a "reform" faction of the apparatus, as well as pseudo-left groups such as the Democratic Socialists of America.

UPS workers under the new deal, including at its Worldport freight hub in Louisville, Kentucky less than two hours away, start out at only \$21 an hour, only a dollar above the poverty wages at CVG. The contract also paves the way for the virtually unrestricted use of automation in order to replace huge swaths of the part-time workforce, which comprises around two-thirds of the company.

Workers founded the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee over the summer to campaign against the sellout and expose the maneuvers of the Teamsters bureaucracy. In

its founding statement, the committee declared: "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."

To the extent that the Teamsters bureaucracy does have a strategy for the DHL strike, it is to use the optics of the strike to improve the union's public image, which has been seriously damaged by its close ties with organized crime and decades of sellouts, in order to promote its efforts to expand its membership base into Amazon and other non-union logistics companies. A similar process is underway in the auto industry, where the United Auto Workers and its "reform" president Shawn Fain are attempting to parlay a toothless partial strike, which led to a sellout contract, into an attempt to expand into non-union auto companies.

The Teamsters have a unionizing campaign underway at Amazon's air facilities at CVG, part of a nationwide effort announced two years ago. But for the bureaucracy, the increase in the union's membership counts only to the extent that it increases the dues base used to help fund its six-figure salaries.

The victory of the CVG strike requires the development of a rank-and-file strike committee, united with similar committees which have already been founded at UPS and by postal workers in the United States, Britain and Germany. These committees, run by workers themselves, not union officials, would seek to countermand any attempt to sell the strike out or any other decision made by the bureaucracy which violates the will of rank-and-file workers.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact