

Layoffs continue at UPS, as Teamsters maintain guilty silence

Tom Hall
15 February 2024

The UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee is holding an emergency online meeting this Sunday, April 7, at 7:00 p.m. Eastern Time: “Organize the rank and file to fight the job cuts at UPS! Unite with autoworkers, tech workers and the whole working class against layoffs!” Register for the meeting here.

Join the fight against the jobs massacre! Join the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee by filling out the form at the end of this article.

UPS is continuing its campaign of layoffs around the United States. Last month, the logistics company announced 12,000 job cuts among administrative and managerial positions, while hundreds of layoffs are being quietly rolled out at warehouse hubs across the country. They are part of a broader offensive against jobs by corporations across the US and the world.

Teamsters officials have maintained a guilty silence, two months since the first layoffs were announced. The job cuts have been made possible by a sellout contract pushed last summer, which General President Sean O’Brien and the rest of the Teamsters bureaucracy falsely claimed was a “historic” victory.

In reality, it was a bait and switch. The union relied upon promises of modest wage increases to \$21 per hour to convince tens of thousands of part-time workers, whose poverty was made possible by decades of concessions by the union bureaucracy, to ensure the contract’s passage. These workers’ jobs are now on the chopping block as the company eliminates whole sorting shifts and moves towards automated facilities.

Opposition to these attacks is continuing to grow. Earlier this month, the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee held an online meeting to discuss a counter-offensive against both management and the corrupt union apparatus. The meeting also took important reports from autoworkers, as well as from Royal Mail in Britain, where mass layoffs are also underway.

118 layoffs in Windsor, Connecticut

On February 6, UPS announced it was eliminating the night sort shift at its facility in Windsor, Connecticut, located in the Hartford metropolitan area. The move will affect 118 people, including 72 part-timers, 23 full-timers and 23 part-time supervisors. The layoffs will take effect at the start of April.

In their public response, Teamsters Local 671 officials ran interference for the company. “Technically, I would use the word ‘displaced’ versus ‘laid off,’” local bureaucrat Tony Lepore told *CT Insider*. “There is no full-timer that’s going to lose their job.

“Lepore said that the full-time employees have seniority and will have an opportunity to work at either the Hartford or Bradley Airport UPS facilities, and the union is working with the part-time employees to move them into open spots at either one of those facilities,” *CT Insider* added.

“However, Lepore said that the seasonal employees will definitely be laid off.”

His statement is not only hair-splitting; it is also a lie. The elimination of a shift at the Windsor Hub is not being offset by new jobs at other locations. Volume at the company declined somewhat last year, and CEO Carol Tomé made clear in the latest investors call that the company aims to consolidate its operations and realize “efficiencies” in its workforce through automation.

Those workers affected by layoffs who are able to find other jobs will do so on the basis of seniority, meaning they will “bump” newer workers out of their jobs at other facilities.

Teamsters bureaucracy complicit

The Windsor layoffs are doubly significant because Local 671 is part of Teamster Joint Council 10, which covers New England. This region was formerly controlled by O’Brien, before he took office as head of the union at the start of 2022. He was infamous among members in the region for his thuggishness, including threats of violence against his opponents in the union for which he was briefly suspended.

However, O’Brien recast himself as a supposed reformer during his election campaign with the help of Teamsters for a Democratic Union and the Democratic Socialists of America. This was part of an operation to refurbish the credibility of the bureaucracy, which had been badly damaged after decades of sellouts and corruption.

O’Brien still has not uttered a word in public about the layoffs, nor has the International union even acknowledged that they have taken place. The layoffs also have not been acknowledged by the pseudo-left press, including *Labor Notes* and *Jacobin* magazine, which spent all their efforts last year stumping for the Teamsters’ “contract campaign” and presenting the O’Brien administration as the dawn of a new era of union reform.

The Teamsters have announced an online town hall for March 3 “for important updates on the state of our new UPS Teamsters contract.” The meeting, taking place more than three months after the first layoffs were announced, will no doubt be an exercise in damage control.

Workers across the US speak out

Other layoffs have been announced in recent months at the Centennial ground hub in Louisville, Kentucky, as well as at facilities in Baltimore, Maryland; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Portland, Oregon. Teamsters Local 767 in Texas has also announced the company intends to carry out layoffs

among package drivers “lasting more than ten days,” although the extent and length of the layoffs were not publicly available at press time.

Baltimore workers explained to the WSWS that the facility had been downgraded from hub status last year and now is operating on only two shifts. The cuts, which take effect March 28, may also affect feeder and cover drivers, they said. One worker said he heard 50 delivery trucks, each attached to one driver, could be getting the axe.

One high-seniority worker said that UPS is offering no transfer options and buyouts and that unemployment benefits are uncertain. The worker was angry at management, who are covering for themselves and their favorite subordinates, “hiding” these workers from the layoff scythe.

Another worker said he supported the contract last year because it supposedly committed the company to hiring more full-time workers. “It makes no sense. If you’re supposed to hire *more* people, and now they’re firing people? Are they running out of money for some reason?”

A UPS worker at the Swan Island hub in Portland, Oregon, said the company has implemented a hiring freeze throughout the region, meaning laid off workers will have nowhere to go. The purpose of targeting the day shift, he said, was to force out relatively high seniority part-timers before they vested into their pensions after five years of service. “Everyone with just under five years have the sword of Damocles hanging over their head,” he said.

Layoffs are also reportedly taking place at UPS in New York City, although the number of workers and the shifts affected have not been verified by the WSWS. However, late last year UPS opened a brand new facility across the Hudson River from New York in Bayonne, New Jersey, and it is likely that the company is seeking to divert operations to the new highly automated hub.

Weaponizing automation against UPS workers

The use of automation is a key tool through which UPS management is aiming to eliminate vast sections of its workforce. Last November, the company opened its new Velocity hub in Louisville, Kentucky, which can move 350,000 packages a day with 3,000 robots and only 200 workers.

According to one human resources worker, the new automated technology has the potential to eliminate 80 percent of warehouse jobs. This was corroborated by the worker from Portland. “Each of our three shifts processes about 100,000 packages a day, so that’s about what Velocity does in a day. And we have about 1,000 people at our facility total. We’re one of the largest conventional buildings, and we have a manual sort.”

The new 886,000-square-foot facility in Bayonne is a regional hub and automated facility, according to an article in the *Bayonne Buzz*. “The company notes that new automated machinery is in use at select facilities including technology that helps unload trailers, sort small packages and move irregularly sized shipments. These new advances not only help with the efficiency of operations, but also reduce repetitive tasks while promoting safety for employees,” the PR article for the company claimed.

“I don’t like these layoffs at all,” a worker at the 43rd Street hub in New York City’s Manhattan borough told the WSWS. “They are doing it because of the pay raise to \$21 an hour they gave us in the contract and because of inflation. [The work] is going to Bayonne in New Jersey. I was told all the work being taken out of here goes over there. It makes it easier for the company. They don’t have to give raises to robots. They don’t have to listen to complaints by workers and they don’t have to fire anyone.”

A part-timer at the New York City hub added, “The workers with little

seniority are being laid off. I’ve worked on the Small Sort and Bag shift for years. We know that 20 of our shift with seniority of less than five years have been laid off, although they are having them come back and work on Mondays. I talked to one laid-off worker when she came in this Monday. She came in, but she cannot survive on one three and a half hours pay a week. Now, what is going to happen to me? Are they going to continue to layoff all part-time sort workers? It is not right.

“I am paying union dues, but the union is going to do what they want slowly, if they want to do anything at all,” he added.

Other new hubs are also reportedly implementing at least some aspects of these new technologies. Last September, the company opened another major new facility in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The East Zone Regional “Super Hub,” or “E-Z Hub,” cost \$1.4 billion, and the state gave the company more than \$9 million in incentives to locate in Pennsylvania, according to a press release from the state government. It is the fourth-largest UPS facility in the country and will eventually employ 2,500 people.

The state’s press release declares: “The 775,000-square-foot distribution facility features the latest sorting, processing, and data capture technology.” Thus, the 2,500 “new” jobs at the facility will be paid for through job cuts elsewhere. Laid-off workers in Baltimore are being told they may be eligible for jobs in Harrisburg, located more than an hour north.

In the Dallas, Texas area, workers at the massive Mesquite hub, the company’s third-largest in the US, were informed this week that the facility will be shut down for years while it undergoes conversion into an automated facility. The exact number of workers who will be affected was not known as of this writing but is almost certainly in the thousands.

UPS workers must mobilize independently of the Teamster apparatus to organize against the job cuts. In a recent statement, the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee proposed the formation of a “counter-campaign” by UPS workers based on three principles: the maximum initiative to the rank and file, the rejection of the “right” of UPS and other huge corporations to profits and the unity with workers across the globe, especially those also facing layoffs.

To contact the committee, fill out the form below.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact