

Teamsters UPS negotiator: Company “has a right” to carry out mass layoffs

Tom Hall
28 March 2024

Join the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee to fight against the closures! Email upsrankandfilecommittee@gmail.com, or fill out the form below this article.

A member of the Teamsters’ national bargaining team at UPS declared that the company “has a right” to eliminate thousands of positions, in comments made to a local union meeting earlier this month.

The exchange underscores that the Teamsters bureaucracy is helping to carry out a jobs massacre at the company, months after pushing through a new contract at UPS that it falsely hailed as a “historic victory.”

By the time the meeting took place, UPS had already announced more than 12,000 layoffs nationwide, including the white collar job cuts and the elimination of numerous shifts of warehouse workers across the country. The cuts are part of a worldwide jobs bloodbath with corporations weaponizing automation and other new technologies to cut hundreds of thousands of jobs.

This, however, was only a down payment. In a conference Tuesday with investors, UPS executives laid out a plan to close more than 200 facilities around the country, using automation to eliminate every possible section of the workforce. This so-called “Network of the Future” would operate with “less dependency on labor,” one executive said, while CEO Carol Tomé declared the company would seek to automate “everything.”

One of the facilities affected is the Swan Island hub in Portland, Oregon, where the meeting with Teamsters officials took place. The facility’s day sort shift was eliminated earlier this year.

The meeting of Teamsters Local 162, held to discuss the layoffs in the Portland area, took place on Saturday, March 16. It was held at 9:00 a.m. local time to deliberately depress turnout. Nevertheless, a few dozen workers attended.

Significantly, local President Mark Davison, who is also the union’s Western Region Vice President and who heads its Western Package Division, was not present. Instead, the main report was given by Business Agent Ben Vodus, who was also a member of the bargaining committee for inside employees.

Vodus sought to minimize the scale of the layoffs. “I was optimistic when all of this started that I could get ... the amount of folks who [are] going to be laid off to a very low number. And because volume is down, it’s going to be a little higher than I anticipated,” he claimed.

In other words, even while attempting to distance the union from responsibility, he still presented layoffs in one form or another as

inevitable, accepting as the starting point UPS’s bottom line. Copying company talking points, he falsely claimed the layoffs were due to a temporary decline in volume, rather than permanent changes in the UPS network.

Vodus absurdly tried to spin a region-wide hiring freeze as the company agreeing not to hire anyone off the street “until we get everybody [laid off] back to work”—in other words, never.

A worker then rose from the floor to ask, “The question I think a lot of people have is: Why isn’t the union fighting against these day shift closures across the country?” The worker was a member of the Independent Teamsters Organizing Committee, a newly-formed group opposed to the layoffs.

Vodus then responded derisively, snapping back, “What they’re doing, they have a right to do.”

This exchange is a highly revealing expression of the bureaucracy’s contempt for the workers they claim to represent. They defend not the rights of workers but the so-called “right” of management to do whatever it wants.

For decades, the pro-capitalist union bureaucracies have functioned as little more than extensions of management. Clauses outlining “management rights” and banning strike action have long been a staple of collective bargaining agreements.

The labor bureaucracy also functions as an extension of the capitalist political establishment, which works through it to uphold the two-party system and prevent workers from developing an independent struggle against capitalism. While the Teamsters executives have said almost nothing about the job cuts, the top leadership of the bureaucracy has held multiple meetings with both President Biden and Donald Trump .

Other elements from the meeting were significant. Vodus attempted to blame layoffs at a hub in Baltimore, Maryland, on an excess of 22.2 workers, the high-seniority workers hired before 1997 who are on a higher wage scale. In other words, those layoffs were the “fault” of workers for being too highly paid.

Another major issue that emerged was on Market Rate Adjustments. These are unilateral wage increases, given and withdrawn at local management’s discretion, in cases where the contractual wage scale is so low that the company is unable to attract enough local workers. At the end of the last contract in 2023, large portions of the country, including Swan Island, were operating under MRAs.

One of the main “highlights” of the new contract was an increase in starting pay for part-timers to \$21 per hour. But some workers at

the time warned that the language on MRAs was so weak that the new wage “increase” could easily be canceled out by withdrawing MRAs.

In the meeting, Vodus admitted that workers who transfer to other facilities would not maintain their MRAs, essentially forcing them to accept a pay cut in order to keep their jobs. While he said the Teamsters were filing a class action grievance against this, this was the predictable result of the contract.

Bureaucracy lied to pass contract

To the extent that management has a purely “contractual” right to carry out the layoffs, this is only because the contract was passed through fraud. The Teamsters deliberately concealed the fact that their contract, which they claimed to be the best in UPS history and even the product of a “credible strike threat” after the union spent months pretending to prepare a national strike, contained no protections against the cuts.

Earlier this week, a video surfaced of Teamsters General President Sean O’Brien falsely claiming at a rally last September that the union “was able to utilize our ... members employed at UPS ... to fight, protect against autonomous vehicles, protect against artificial intelligence, to ensure that our members employed at UPS had a future that was not gonna be replaced by artificial intelligence and robots.”

This was a bald-faced lie. The contract explicitly allows the company to close facilities and eliminate shifts without restriction so long as the company gives the union 45 days’ notice.

The Teamsters have not even issued a formal statement yet acknowledging the mass layoffs, months after they began. The only reference made by O’Brien came during a “contract update” webinar held earlier in March, which lasted only nine minutes.

At the Portland meeting, Vodus refused to elaborate on the plans for automation when questioned by other workers. He also claimed that, as a member of the bargaining team for inside workers, he was unaware of these plans during the contract talks. This is absurd, given that inside workers would always have been the hardest hit by automation. But even if it were true, it only would indicate that the Teamsters made no attempt at all to protect workers from job cuts.

It must be said bluntly: The bureaucracy is not simply standing aside while UPS carries out job cuts. It is directly helping to impose them. In UPS presentations Tuesday, they emphasized that “labor certainty” was a key element in their plans. In separate comments to the press, CEO Carol Tomé bragged that the new Teamsters contract secured a sharp decrease in cost growth after the first year of the deal.

While thousands of workers lose their jobs, the Teamsters are fighting vigorously against workers’ freedom of speech. Recently, the union filed a lawsuit against TeamsterLink, a popular independent message board used by members, for “copyright infringement” for its use of the Teamsters name and logo. This thuggish attack forced the messageboard to change its name.

At the same time, pseudo-left “reform” groups like Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), which entered the leadership of the Teamsters thanks to its endorsement of O’Brien in the 2021 union election, are helping run damage control by claiming that layoffs can be fought through “contract enforcement.”

In fact, the layoffs can only be fought through a fight against the contract itself, which is not a “collective bargaining agreement” but a conspiracy between management and the bureaucracy. Both as a basic principle and as a matter of contract law, no deal passed through such levels of fraud can be considered legitimate.

The exchange in Portland underscores the correctness of the call by the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee for a “counter-campaign” by UPS workers against the job cuts.

In laying out the principles for this campaign, the statement declared:

First, the maximum initiative must remain in the hands of rank-and-file workers. We must not be chained to a perspective of pressuring this or that union bureaucrat or waiting on the outcome of backroom talks. We insist we have the right and the duty to take all actions which we deem necessary to defend our jobs, regardless of whether the bureaucracy sanctions them or not.

Second, we must reject the “right” of UPS and other corporations to a profit at our expense. ... The problem is not a lack of money but the domination of the logistics and delivery networks at the heart of the modern economy by massive corporations run by super-wealthy oligarchs.

Third, we must unite with workers in logistics and other industries around the US and the world. Everywhere the policy of the major multinational corporations is the same: endless job and wage cuts to pay for profits and for wars in defense of profits. We must meet their global strategy with a global movement uniting workers across all countries in defense of our common interests.

For information on joining the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee, fill out the form below.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact