

1,400 University of Minnesota workers ready to strike as Teamsters bureaucracy holds them back

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More than 1,400 custodians, cooks, maintenance and dorm workers at the University of Minnesota were prepared to walk out on Wednesday, August 20—the first system-wide strike at the university in nearly five decades. But after workers voted 97 percent to authorize a strike, the Teamsters Local 320 bureaucracy called off the walkout at 11 p.m. the night before, declaring it would “study” the administration’s “last, best, and final” offer.

Voting on this offer ended on Tuesday, August 26. The Teamsters union recommended a “No” vote while simultaneously refusing to set a new strike date, effectively locking workers into the bargaining table and demobilizing the rank and file.

There is little to “study” in the new offer that workers have not already made up their minds about. A quick review of the proposal shows it is essentially a pay cut in disguise. Wages amount to 5 percent increases over the next two years, plus a total of \$1,000 in “sign-on” bonuses. This is a real wage cut once the July CPI spike of 0.2 percent month-on-month (3 percent annualized) and a projected 10 percent jump in health insurance premiums are factored in. Since 2022, real wages for these workers have fallen more than 12 percent; the current offer guarantees another three years of decline.

Taking to social media to vent their frustrations, workers described the UMN offer and the Teamsters’ maneuvers as a “waste of time.” One veteran worker of 21 years commented on the Local’s Facebook page: “Waste a bunch of time voting no instead of going on strike like we should have.” The worker continued,

“Management got 4 percent—why should we get less? Our leadership, in my opinion, should have led us into a strike instead of unanimously encouraging us to vote no on something we should have just walked on!”

UMN workers’ unanimous call for a strike is part of a broader upsurge in the working class and reflects a real desire to fight back against decades of attacks on wages and working conditions. Teamsters members across the country have been involved in several strikes this year alone. But they confront an implacable enemy in the Teamsters bureaucracy.

This is a far cry from the days of the 1934 Teamsters strike in Minneapolis, in which workers in Local 574—led principally by the Trotskyist movement—united workers across the city to beat back the state-corporate alliance against truck drivers and coal yard workers.

Now, the unions function as labor watchdogs, ensuring that opposition from the working class does not disrupt the profits of the banks and corporations or the imperialist aims of the American ruling class. They accomplish this by hamstringing workers’ opposition and tying it to the Democratic and Republican parties, two capitalist parties that represent the interests of billionaires.

In the case of the Teamsters, General President Sean O’Brien used the union’s prestige to legitimize Donald Trump’s war on the working class, delivering the first-ever Teamster address to the Republican National Convention in 2024. The same organization that claims to defend workers is cozying up to Trump and his fascist policies, which aim to eviscerate the gains workers won through bitter struggle in previous decades (including the 1934 strike itself) and to eliminate the remaining democratic rights workers

have.

O'Brien has also attempted to legitimize Trump's reactionary policy of tariffs, justifying them with fraudulent claims that they will defend jobs: "For years, Hollywood studios have hollowed out the industry by following Corporate America's crooked playbook of outsourcing good union jobs... We thank President Trump for boldly supporting good union jobs"—even as Mexican brewery workers (also Teamsters!) face layoffs from the same "protectionist" measures.

O'Brien has further supported the attack on immigrant workers, which the WSWS warned is the prelude to a larger war against all sections of the working class: "The biggest problem is people trying to protect illegal aliens"—a green light for ICE raids that will rip families apart in university communities. UMN workers must take this very seriously.

UMN workers are not alone in their fight; they are part of a massive upsurge in working-class struggles. The possibility of winning their battle and blazing a path for broader resistance against decades of concessions to American capitalism is real. It depends on UMN workers leading the way for workers across the Twin Cities.

Their fight coincides with a broader growth in workers opposition. Around 3,000 Boeing workers are currently on strike, joined by 600 GE Aerospace workers.

UMN workers also reject claims that "there is no money." The university sits on an endowment exceeding \$6 billion and recently approved raises for top administrators. The Board of Regents insists that "budget constraints" prevent decent wages for the workers who keep the campus running. President Rebecca Cunningham—whose salary exceeds \$1 million, with around a \$950,000 "base,"—claims the university "values every employee." Yet the administration has already spent \$1.3 million on a scab "contingency" workforce consisting of out-of-state contractors, using tuition dollars in an effort to undermine the strike before it began.

The WSWS and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) call on all campus workers—academic student employees, clerical staff, trades workers and faculty—to mobilize in joint strike committees independent of the pro-corporate union apparatus. University workers must reject the

fiction that the Teamsters bureaucracy can "negotiate" with a university whose Board of Regents is aligned with Trump's austerity agenda.

Workers must take the struggle into their own hands and organize independently of the Democrats and Republicans. There is money to meet workers' needs, but the parties of big business are demanding austerity as they intensify the assault on the working class and prepare for war. Only a unified struggle—linking wages to the fight against war, dictatorship and the privatization of public education—can defeat the regents' austerity offensive and advance the interests of the entire working class.



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