

“We were willing to strike; We should have gotten more”

Who Moves America: The incomplete story of the 2023 struggle at UPS

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A new documentary titled *Who Moves America* (2026) and directed by Yael Bridge examines the struggle of 340,000 UPS workers for a new contract in 2023. Many of its first screenings have been sold out, and audiences have given the film standing ovations. This warm reception reflects growing anger in the working class against mass layoffs, social inequality and attacks on democratic rights. It also underscores the need for an objective appraisal of the film.

In 2023, 97 percent of UPS workers voted to authorize a strike, signaling immense opposition to low wages, the two-tier driver classification and sweltering delivery trucks, among other issues. A strike would have paralyzed UPS and won the support of millions in the US and globally. A week before the strike deadline, however, the Teamsters leadership prevented a walkout by announcing a tentative agreement. This deal not only fell short of workers’ demands but also has paved the way for some 60,000 job eliminations and 93 facility closures so far.

Who Moves America gives an incomplete picture of the struggle at UPS. It includes ample footage of Teamsters President Sean O’Brien and implicitly accepts his militant rhetoric as genuine. In fact, O’Brien earned a reputation for faction fighting and threatening his opponents before he presented himself as a “reformer.” At the same time, the documentary shows UPS workers expressing their concerns about working conditions, about how a strike would affect them and about the tentative agreement that the leadership negotiated. Though the documentary includes valuable footage, it also leaves out essential information and must be viewed critically.

Footage of the 1997 UPS strike begins *Who Moves America* and is interspersed throughout. Workers and Teamsters bureaucrats often refer to this strike during the film. It is presented as a victory, but the truth is more complicated. Although the parties reached an agreement that included raises and allowed for some part-time positions to be converted to full-time positions, it also preserved the multi-tier system that allowed UPS to maintain a large pool of lower-paid, part-time labor. The introduction of real-time monitoring has likely increased the high productivity quotas that motivated the 1997

strike, and injuries remain high. The 1997 contract thus represented a compromise brokered by the Teamsters apparatus to preserve the company’s ability to pursue profits through labor “flexibility.”

As the WSWS has explained:

In all fundamentals, the [1997] final agreement upheld the interests of the company. It maintained the two-tier wage structure and barely put a dent in the exploitation of part-time labor. In a concession crucial to the company’s plans, it gave UPS five years to revamp its operations before the next contract. The pay increase for full-time workers, an average of 3 percent a year, was below the national average for 1997 and resulted in a decline in real wages.

Bridge’s documentary follows several workers from across the country as they participated in the 2023 contract struggle. One is a relatively new driver in California who takes the fight against the company seriously but acknowledges that a strike would force him to cut expenses, such as the care that his autistic son receives. Another is a part-time warehouse worker in Kentucky balancing multiple jobs as she simultaneously goes to college. A third is a New York veteran of the 1997 strike who has become a low-level Teamsters official.

The demands that workers discuss include higher pay, including for part-timers and more time off. They air their grievances about excessive overtime and delivery trucks that lack air conditioning. They also talk about how they could help each other overcome financial problems during a strike. This solidarity is laudable but tellingly suggests that the workers don’t count on the Teamsters to give them the support they need.

We see O’Brien and other union officials empty speechifying about taking the fight to UPS. The workers are soon marching in “practice pickets” that the union leadership organized, ostensibly to show the company that they mean

business. Meanwhile, the Teamsters apparatus is working behind the scenes to prevent a strike that could harm its mutually beneficial relationship with management.

One week before the strike deadline, O'Brien announces on a call to workers that the union has achieved "the best contract we've ever had at UPS" and "the richest deal for part-timers in 40 years at UPS."

Not all workers are impressed, and many are openly critical. "We've had a historic pandemic. We've had historic inflation," says one worker. "This is not a historic contract."

Several workers criticize the fact that air conditioning will not be installed in the trucks immediately. "I'm probably not going to be here by the time the air conditioning goes in the truck," says one.

"We were willing to strike. We should have gotten more," one worker tells a union official during the vote. "They're suspending and they're firing people left and right," he said, adding that management is treating workers even worse than usual.

A part-time worker on day sort in Secaucus, New Jersey, distributes flyers to persuade her coworkers to reject the contract. She argues correctly that the \$21 hourly wage is inadequate and that workers need more hours. "We absolutely should be fighting for more," she says. "We come here, we're exploited, the company makes billions and billions of dollars and then tells us we should be grateful if they give us a few more crumbs." Even higher pay and better benefits are not enough, she adds. "Those things will be taken away if we're not mobilized."

Who Moves America ends with the ratification of the contract and says nothing about the mass layoffs that it enabled. In 2024, UPS laid off 12,000 workers in management and administrative positions. In 2025, the company eliminated a further 48,000 jobs. This year, UPS plans to eliminate as many as 30,000 more through buyouts and attrition. Moreover, UPS closed 93 facilities in 2025 and plans to shutter 24 more this year. Entire shifts are likely to be eliminated. In response, Teamsters officials have threatened to file ineffectual grievances and lawsuits but have not called for a strike to defend jobs.

The reason for this failure to fight is that the well-heeled Teamsters leadership seeks above all to maintain its own material interests, bound up with those of management. The bureaucrats' pro-corporate orientation was made unmistakable when O'Brien spoke at the 2024 Republican National Convention. Amid mass layoffs at UPS, O'Brien boasted about the company's efficiency and demanded that it become "easier for companies to remain in America." This is the agenda of corporate and finance capital. It is incompatible with that of the working class. O'Brien's speech was also a de facto endorsement of the fascistic Donald Trump, who had attempted to overturn the results of the 2020 election by inciting a mob to storm the Capitol.

The approach of the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party to the 2023 contract and Teamsters sellout was very different than that of the makers of *Who Moves America*. At a meeting of the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee in August 2023, one speaker explained:

You face a union bureaucracy, not a few bad apples at the top. You have no control whatsoever over this apparatus, which is hostile and terrified of the workers they claim to represent. ... The bureaucracy is sitting on your chest. You have to chase out the whole thing, smash it and replace it with democratic structures which Teamsters members themselves control.

O'Brien and the Teamsters are by no means unique. The trade unions serve today as labor police forces in the service of capitalism and the government. Shawn Fain, president of the United Auto Workers (UAW), is another prominent example. In 2023, Fain oversaw a phony "stand-up strike" and the imposition of a contract that maintained depressed wages, laid the groundwork for mass layoffs and deepened the UAW bureaucracy's ties to the auto companies. Today, he promotes Trump's economic nationalism and the "arsenal of democracy" (the conversion of industry to war production). It is worth noting that Jeremy Flood, one of the producers of *Who Moves America*, worked with the UAW for years and now works for the pseudo-leftist and Trump pal, New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani.

As long as workers remain shackled by the trade union apparatus, they will not be able to defend their previous gains, let alone achieve new victories. Will Lehman, a socialist autoworker from Macungie, Pennsylvania, is promoting a new strategy. He is running for president of the UAW on a program of abolishing the trade union bureaucracy and restoring power to the shop floor. Lehman calls for workers to form rank-and-file committees that are independent of the trade unions and the capitalist parties. Only through these independent committees will workers be able to unite their struggles and wage a genuine fight against not only the corporations but also the profit system that is the cause of exploitation and war.



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