

Support for strike action at UPS as Teamsters union prepares sell-out contract

By Tom Hall
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Mass support for strike action is growing among workers at United Parcel Service (UPS), where the current contract with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) covering 280,000 hourly workers is set to expire on August 1. A strike authorization, which is being held through June 3, is widely expected to provide an overwhelming “yes” vote.

The impending struggle at one of the largest private employers in the United States, with 434,000 workers, comes in the midst of a resurgence of the class struggle in the United States, where man-hours lost due to strikes have already eclipsed totals from all of last year.

Strikes by teachers, which acquired mass support throughout the country and internationally, particularly after teachers rebelled against the attempts by the unions to shut them down, point to the potential that exists for a broader struggle. Approximately 200,000 US Postal Service workers in the American Postal Workers Union also face the expiration of their national contract on September 20.

UPS workers confront as an enemy not only the company, but the Teamsters union. The union bureaucracy, headed by James Hoffa, son of former president Jimmy Hoffa, is working hand-in-glove with UPS through secret contract talks to impose massive givebacks. Leaks from the Teamsters negotiating committee revealed that the union has proposed the creation of a lower-paid second tier of package delivery drivers, who would start out at only \$15 an hour, a fraction of the current rate.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, these “hybrid” drivers would be scheduled Sunday through Thursday or Tuesday through Saturday to avoid weekend overtime rates currently paid to senior, full-time drivers. The company has also floated a proposal for a mandatory six-day, 70-hour workweek during busy periods or whenever the company deems it necessary.

As with the treachery of the teachers’ unions earlier this year, the Teamsters’ preparations for a sellout demonstrate that the unions are not workers’ organizations, but agencies of management which see their role as the suppression of the

class struggle and the promotion of the interests of management. As a union lawyer told Supreme Court judges considering the *Janus v. AFSCME* case earlier this year, “Union security is the tradeoff for no strikes.” If public employee unions were denied agency fees from workers who opted out of the unions, he warned, “you can raise an untold specter of labor unrest throughout the country.”

For UPS, shedding labor costs is seen as indispensable. Even though the company made \$4.9 billion in profits last year, operating profits declined by 2.4 percent in the United States due to rising costs. The company also faces pressure from Amazon, whose order fulfillment centers set the standards for low wages and technological efficiency. Amazon is planning to introduce a package delivery service later this year, Ship with Amazon, that would directly compete with UPS and FedEx, cutting into their market share of the growing e-commerce delivery business.

UPS was one of the pioneers of the multi-tier wage system in the late 1970s, when it began hiring part time employees to work in their facilities for significantly less than their full-time counterparts. Today, roughly 70 percent of the company’s workforce is part-time.

Conditions have worsened significantly since then. In 1978, a part timer in New York City would have been paid around \$7.50 per hour. Today, UPS part time workers start out at \$10 per hour, a decline in real terms of more than 65 percent.

Two part-time UPS workers in Portland, Oregon, who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* described the physical and emotional toll of working at a UPS hub. “I lost 20 to 25 pounds the first year there working part time. In peak season, it’s a lot more hours,” one said. “When I was hired, there was a girl who dropped out in the first week, she couldn’t handle it, just left, crying.” Turnover at the hub is astronomical, as high as 90 percent, the second worker said.

For drivers, UPS routinely flouts state law limiting working hours to 11 hours per day, opting instead to pay the paltry fines. “We had one driver literally work himself to exhaustion this past week. He was delivering packages and

he collapsed in the lobby of a business where he was delivering.”

“For most people, the rule is don’t cry until you get to your car,” the second worker said. “But, its abnormal if someone doesn’t cry on their shift. And that is regular.”

The ongoing strike authorization vote conducted by the notoriously corrupt, gangster-ridden Teamster bureaucracy will likely return an overwhelming mandate for a strike. However, the union will do everything that it can to prevent a strike, or, if that becomes impossible, to limit its scope and shut it down as quickly as possible.

Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), a faction of the trade union bureaucracy, has criticized Hoffa and the secretive and undemocratic maneuvers by the negotiating committee. Its members on the negotiating committee were also responsible for leaking the Teamster proposal for “hybrid drivers,” for which they were expelled by Denis Taylor, head of the IBT package division.

However, TDU are not political innocents. They were brought into the Teamsters leadership in the mid-1990s under president Ron Carey, who was hailed at the time as a great reformer who would sweep away the mafia-infested “old guard” under the Hoffa dynasty.

This was exposed as a sham in the 1997 UPS strike, when Carey enforced a sellout-deal, which included wage increases below the national average, sending strikers back to work without a vote. Only days later, Carey was indicted on federal corruption charges stemming from his funneling nearly \$1 million from the Teamsters treasury into his own re-election campaign, in an illegal scheme that involved the Democratic National Committee and top AFL-CIO leaders, including current president and then-secretary-treasurer Richard Trumka.

The TDU, which was initiated by pseudo-left organizations affiliated with the Labor Notes publication, including Solidarity, explicitly opposed any struggle to politically arm the working class against the pro-capitalist and nationalist program of the unions, and their political subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party. Instead these organizations promoted “union reform” in the Teamsters, the United Auto Workers and other unions.

The TDU, like Labor Notes as a whole, is nothing more today than a faction of the union bureaucracy. There is deep hatred among rank-and-file to the Teamsters, which has the well-earned reputation of being particularly brutal and shameless in its suppression of rank-and-file opposition. The aim of the TDU, however, is not to articulate this opposition, but to capture it before it escapes the control of the union and begins to develop into a broader class movement.

The TDU and Labor Notes insist that workers obey the

authority of the unions. Above all, they are opposed to the fight by the Socialist Equality Party for UPS and other workers to form rank-and-file factory and work place committees, controlled democratically by workers themselves, to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the Teamsters and other unions.

A crucial element in the ability of the unions to force through betrayals in the recent teacher strikes was the role played by various “dissident” figures, such as Oklahoma Teachers United founder Larry Cagle and Arizona Educators United leader Noah Karvelis, who promoted the fiction that the unions could be pressured through rank and file militancy into leading a genuine struggle. This perspective of reform left the teachers unprepared when the unions ended the strike at precisely the point where the mobilization and support for the teachers was at its highest.

The *Labor Notes* and Democratic Socialists of America aligned *Jacobin* publication, which promoted these figures during the teacher strikes, are now promoting the TDU. Functioning as advisors to the union apparatus, these publications have argued that a deal the union could sell as a “victory” with UPS would help the Teamsters make headway unionizing Amazon workers.

UPS workers must oppose the company-union conspiracy and elect independent rank-and-file committees, separate from and in opposition to the Teamsters union. This must form the basis for appealing to broader sections of the working class including USPS, FedEx and Amazon workers, and making their fight the center of a broader offensive by the entire working class against poverty wages, joblessness and inequality. Above all, it must be guided by an understanding that they face not only the intransigence of a particular employer or trade union bureaucrat, but the entire capitalist system, which is incapable of utilizing great advances in communications and transportation technologies to meet the needs of a complex, globally integrated society. Instead workers must fight for a socialist alternative, including the transformation of UPS and Amazon into publicly controlled and collectively owned enterprises, so the vast wealth created by the working class can be controlled by workers themselves.

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