

“We are just another package that can be replaced”

FedEx, UPS workers outraged after Illinois truck driver died on the job in extreme cold weather

By George Marlowe
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William L. Murphy, a 69-year-old FedEx semi-truck driver, died Thursday morning at the company's large freight delivery hub in East Moline, Illinois. Murphy's body was found frozen between two semi-trucks by another FedEx employee.

While the exact cause of Murphy's death has not yet been determined (an autopsy is scheduled for Monday), authorities think the deadly temperature drops between negative 20 and negative 30 degrees Fahrenheit was the likely immediate factor.

Murphy's death occurred as large parts of the United States were hit by extremely cold Arctic air flows, a weather pattern known as the polar vortex. The vortex of cold air, which typically moves around the Arctic, has moved further south as a result of global climate change and warming temperatures at the North Pole.

The deadly subzero temperatures affecting more than 83 million people across the Midwest prompted the United States Postal Service (USPS) to shut down operations for deliveries and mail service on Wednesday and Thursday. The conditions were so dangerously cold that even a five-minute exposure could cause severe frostbite, requiring immediate medical attention. So far, at least 23 people in the Midwest have died due to the cold weather, with nine people dying in Chicago.

Despite the clear danger of exposure to the extreme cold, corporations like UPS and FedEx kept workers on the job at various hubs in life-threatening conditions, demonstrating that they care far more about profits than about workers' lives. While FedEx cancelled work at some facilities and hubs, it did allow drivers in parts of

the Midwest to continue to work. Service workers at Target and fast-food workers were also asked to go to work, even as many must take public transportation and face the elements while waiting for a train or a bus.

The death of William L. Murphy prompted outrage by workers across the country. Conor, a FedEx worker in Chicago, was appalled when he heard the news. He told the WSWs, “I think it's a tragedy that someone that old was in a position where he still needed to work in dangerous weather and I think it was a horrendous oversight to be running operations in weather that is potentially deadly. It's insane that a 69 year-old-man still had to work. They knew it was dangerous to be outside but still told people to come in.”

Jessica, a worker in Chicago, blamed FedEx for the death of the worker. “Fedex should be held responsible! Even the USPS canceled all mail deliveries for this reason. No one deserves to lose their life because of high demand packages.”

FedEx, the Memphis-based logistics company which made more than \$4 billion in profits last year, is notorious for keeping workers on the job even in extreme weather conditions. The company issued a hypocritical statement noting that it was “saddened by the loss of our team member.” The statement added, “FedEx has contingency plans in place to ensure the well-being of our team members and service providers. Several of our centers, including the Rock Island center, were closed or running very limited operations this week due to the extreme temperature.”

Like other logistics and warehousing companies such as UPS, FedEx maintains extremely low wages for its

employees. The FedEx Ground division has faced numerous lawsuits for over a decade for the way it classifies more than 30,000 delivery drivers as “independent contractors,” many of whom work for small independent subcontractors. Even though the drivers have to work under strict FedEx guidelines, the company uses this classification to save on health care and retirement benefits, unemployment insurance, overtime pay and other labor costs. Drivers classified as contractors have to purchase and maintain their own vehicles, which drives many into crippling debts and bankruptcy.

“A 69-year-old man should continue working if he so desires,” said Anna on Facebook in response to the death. “It’s likely, however, since he was working on such a dangerously cold day, that he was working to pay the bills. The sad truth is that our seniors often do not earn enough social security benefits so that they postpone retirement as long as possible.”

LJ told the WSWS, “My wife works for FedEx. They rarely close and if they do, it’s only because they are required to. She has been complaining about the cold building in her hub. It is extremely dangerous to allow employees to work in these conditions.”

UPS drivers were also asked to deliver packages in cities throughout Illinois including Chicago and Rockford. Many of the package delivery trucks are not heated. The company also made Chicago warehouse workers come to work—only to find freezing conditions and frozen pipes that leaked.

Dameon, a UPS worker in Rockford, Illinois spoke out about the death of the FedEx worker and the fact that UPS drivers had to work in some areas. “They should have cared about worker safety over profits. My hub closed and so did Amazon. Not all drivers got out of working and it’s understandable. I warned all my coworkers that if they felt it was not safe or worth the risk of the pay to call off. During a state of emergency our contract protects us from retaliation from call offs. Workers need to demand better. It’s sad it takes deaths to bring awareness.”

Chicago UPS workers were also outraged that they had to work during extreme cold conditions. The Teamsters Local 705 union which covers more than 8,000 UPS workers did nothing to stop this. At the national and local levels, the Teamsters have worked with UPS to impose the dictates of management

through concessions contracts which maintain poverty wages and unsafe working conditions. In an effort to shore up their dues base, the Teamsters have so far unsuccessfully been attempting to unionize FedEx as well.

Oscar, a UPS driver in Chicago, told the WSWS on Thursday, “I actually called off. I still can’t believe UPS made us work. It just shows how much more they care about their numbers and profits than our health. We understand our job deals with all kinds of weather but there’s a line we shouldn’t cross. Today I went in and in the morning it showed negative 18 with negative 40 wind chill. They told us we were going to be called back to the building at 4 p.m. I punched out at 8:10 a.m. I’m just disappointed. We are just another package that can be replaced.”

A UPS warehouse worker in Chicago was outraged at the response of the company and the union. “UPS and the union don’t care about workers,” he said on Facebook. “They make us work fast to meet their production and make them money. You can cancel day sort for heat and no power but you can’t cancel work in dangerous conditions, especially workers who take public transportation with no heat!”

Another UPS worker in Chicago said on Wednesday, “Volume is heavy at the building. We’ll be the only delivery drivers working today. Not USPS, not FedEx, or DHL. All I’m saying is that took two hours of air traffic controllers not working for the government to reopen. What message would UPS get if their drivers call in across the Midwest?”

The WSWS UPS Workers Newsletter urges workers to contact us to report unsafe conditions and to learn about forming rank-and-file committees at UPS and FedEx facilities to fight for safety, higher wages and more. You can also text UPSWORKER to 555888 to get updates.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>