

“We aren’t going to take it anymore:” Anger among UPS workers as Teamsters union seeks to rein in logistics strike wave

By Kayla Costa
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Like workers at the retail giant Amazon and across the logistics industry, drivers and warehouse workers for United Parcel Services (UPS) report dangerous workplace conditions that place them at risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus.

Three workers at the Chelmsford UPS warehouse near Lowell, Massachusetts tested positive for COVID-19, according to a leak to the Teamsters local. As a result, more than two dozen coworkers were placed under mandatory quarantine due to contact with the sick workers.

Workers on Facebook have reported that at least two UPS workers have died in the Chicago area from COVID-19, including Jerome Sutton, who left behind a wife and a young son.

Neither management nor the Teamsters has confirmed these reports.

The company has refused to confirm the extent of the pandemic’s spread at UPS warehouses, cynically citing concerns for confidentiality. Management failed to inform workers at the Chelmsford warehouse where the latest cases were confirmed. Instead, they are expected to continue working with no significant changes.

UPS officials have publicly confirmed only one case in the entire country, at a San Diego warehouse, earlier this week. But there is reason to believe that dozens of confirmed cases are known but not being reported by management, not including those workers who exhibit symptoms but cannot obtain a test in their area and those who are currently presymptomatic carriers of the disease.

Jess, a part-time loader at a UPS hub near Los Angeles, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he was given a warning letter by management for calling out

sick last week. “We have an employee in an induced coma from covid-19. Supposedly it happened 3 weeks ago, and he got it from home. It’s what the company told us. The company is also saying they just found out. And here’s the weird part. They said that his work area was cleaned before, but they were going to clean it again tonight just to make sure. If they didn’t know until today, then why did they say it was cleaned before? Someone had to know if they had cleaned his work area before.”

“We need protection,” Jess said. “It took UPS almost a month into the epidemic for us to finally get gloves and sanitizers. Who knows if we are working with infected employees? The company doesn’t want to say anything to us because they claim it will cause panic. That’s what management said.”

Jess supports a strike at UPS to join the Amazon workers because “we can make a point that we are not going to take it anymore.”

“I’m just tired of corporations choosing profits over people. They have been doing it for a long time and only people from the inside have been made aware of this. With COVID-19, it’s finally coming out to the public showing the true colors of these kinds of corporations. Employees are getting ill in the workplace and they don’t care. We are not essential workers; we are expendable workers.”

This lack of transparency has proven to be a common practice within the “essential” industries, such as logistics and even health care. UPS workers have reported many of the same issues that are driving workers of Amazon, Instacart, Whole Foods and other companies to go on strike, including the lack of protective equipment and cleaning supplies, inadequate

social distancing measures, pressure from management not to call out sick, and the failure to close facilities that have confirmed cases.

These strikes and protests have taken place outside of or in opposition to the trade unions. Amazon, Whole Foods and Instacart are nonunion workplaces. The walkouts at automotive plants in Michigan and Ohio took place after direct confrontation with representatives of the United Auto Workers (UAW), which has enforced the dictates of management even as autoworkers die from COVID-19.

UPS workers have their own obstacle to overcome in order to carry out such a struggle: the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT). Teamsters President James Hoffa, who is the son of former Teamster president Jimmy Hoffa, and whose net worth is roughly \$2 million, praised his own administration on a recent episode of the Teamsters' official podcast for "doing a great job" and "working really hard."

He boasted that the Teamsters leadership had been talking with their Democratic Party "friends on Capitol Hill," who passed a \$2 trillion bailout of Wall Street, which included only miniscule stopgaps for those laid-off and workers. This massive handout to corporate America was praised by union officials throughout the country, including UAW president Rory Gamble.

Hoffa highlighted the extra sick pay for workers who provide official documentation of a confirmed COVID-19 case. But this benefit, which does not cover the workers who show symptoms and are not able to get testing, was already promised to workers of most major corporations, including nonunion Amazon, before the union-backed management at UPS got on the bandwagon.

The opposition faction of the Teamsters bureaucracy, organized under the Teamsters United and Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), has completely closed ranks with the Hoffa administration, abandoning its former criticism of the Teamsters president, and has pivoted towards unionization drives at nonunion companies such as Amazon, where walkouts are spreading. Even before the pandemic, this was presaged by its decision to endorse a Teamsters United slate in next year's union elections headed by Sean O'Brien, the thuggish former Hoffa loyalist.

In one petition calling on Amazon to rehire Christian

Smalls, the leader of the walkouts at Amazon warehouse in New York, TDU claims that he was fired because "Amazon workers don't have a union to protect them." But while claiming to support strike action at Amazon, TDU has not even raised the issue of walkouts at UPS. This is in spite of the fact that the current UPS contract, which contains major concessions, was ratified by the Teamsters bureaucracy against a majority "no" vote—a fact that TDU neglects to inform Amazon workers about.

Instead, TDU is circulating a toothless petition calling on UPS to provide 14 days of sick leave and to sanitize its facilities. It does not even demand the most elemental measures that Amazon workers themselves have demanded, including the closure of facilities where outbreaks have occurred and the handling of only essential goods such as food and medicine.

The TDU's advertising efforts for the Teamsters at Amazon reflect the fear of the bureaucracy of a total loss of control, under conditions of an explosive strike wave in which the working class, motivated by deeper questions about the entire social structure, has begun to emerge as a political force. By bringing the strikes at Amazon under the influence of the unions, TDU is seeking to smother this growing social movement, above all before it finds reflection at UPS and other companies where the Teamsters does business.

There is growing sentiment among UPS workers to organize a fight to join this growing strike wave. But such a struggle must be organized independent of the corrupt, pro-company Teamsters union through the formation of rank-and-file workplace committees. Run democratically by the workers themselves, these committees will form the organizational basis to link up the struggle at UPS with workers throughout the world to demand a rational, worldwide mobilization of society's resources to fight the pandemic, in opposition to the profit motive where it conflicts with the health and safety of society.

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