

UPS Teamsters start strike authorization vote

written by Sean Orr and Elliot Lewis
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Members of Teamsters Local 804 in New York City rally around their contract demands aimed at UPS. The national contract expires July 31. UPS Teamsters are voting on whether to authorize a strike this week. Photo: Matt Leichenger.

With the largest private sector labor contract in the United States set to expire on July 31 at midnight, the eyes of the American labor movement are on United Parcel Service (UPS) and the nearly 350,000 Teamsters who work there.

The Teamsters announced a UPS strike authorization [vote](#) starting this week, with results to be announced on June 16. Union leaders are strongly urging a yes vote. “This is how we win,” said Teamsters General President Sean O’Brien.

Our contract fight matters for the entire working class. We want workers everywhere—and especially at Amazon and FedEx—to see that organizing a union leads to better pay and working conditions and greater control over their working lives and opens the door to a better world.

There’s no better opportunity to show what we mean than a strike victory against UPS and Wall Street this summer.

Second-tier drivers

The roots of this fight go back decades. UPS jobs were once considered a yardstick of secure union jobs. Now 60 percent of the workforce is part-time, making around the minimum wage in many regions.

Drivers in many locations are forced to work six days a week and up to 14 hours a day with forced overtime. Managers follow drivers in personal vehicles and relentlessly harass workers to scare us into working faster.

In 2018, former Teamsters President James P. Hoffa [forced a contract upon members](#) despite a majority no vote. It kept part-time wages low and established a second-tier driver position, named “22.4” for the contract section that created it. Now new drivers make less money and get fewer overtime protections than existing drivers doing the same work.

The rank and file, organizing through the reform caucus Teamsters for a Democratic Union, fought these concessions the whole way. TDU activists organized a “vote no” campaign in 2013 and again in 2018 against concessionary contracts. Then in 2021, TDU led the charge to [elect a coalition slate of reformers](#) to the union’s top leadership on a platform of fighting more aggressively to reverse these concessions.

Now UPS Teamsters are demanding a significant pay increase for part-timers to \$25 an hour, the elimination of 22.4’s two-tier wages for package car drivers, an end to forced sixth days of work, increased [pension](#) payouts for 60,000 workers so they’re more equal across the country, no driver-facing cameras, more holidays, and an end to subcontracting and the use of gig workers.

In the rank and file, expectations are high. If the two-tier wage structure for drivers is not eliminated on day one of this contract, it is a strike issue. If part-time workers do not get a significant pay increase, it is a strike issue. If all workdays beyond the five-day work week are not totally voluntary, it is a strike issue.

Some of these demands are about regaining ground lost by past union administrations. But for many workers, especially those hired since the last contract, this is about fighting for more. UPSers kept the economy running throughout the Covid-19 pandemic without a penny of hazard pay, and we watched UPS make record profits off our backs while working forced overtime. Of course, we now want our fair share.

There’s widespread support for these demands, and people are ready to fight for them. The rank and file will not accept a half deal, trade-offs, or “sharing the burden” with UPS.

Wall Street marching orders

Seventy-two percent of UPS stocks are owned by Wall Street firms; the two largest

shareholders are Vanguard Capital and BlackRock. These firms and others own big chunks of our economy, including not just UPS but also its main private competitors, including FedEx and the railroads.

What does Wall Street want out of the UPS contract? Steady and massive profits. From their perspective, UPS is one of the great success stories of the pandemic.

From 2012 to 2019, UPS's yearly profits ranged from \$7.1 billion to \$8.2 billion. In 2020, when the rest of the economy was suffering, UPS still made over \$8.7 billion. Then the company reported the largest profits in its history: \$13.1 billion in 2021 and \$13.9 billion in 2022.

UPS will try to further increase these profits in the 2023 contract by asking for "flexibility" to schedule employees to work any of the seven days in a week, the installation of driver-facing cameras to further harass workers, and the continued use of gig workers to deliver packages.

The biggest impediment to Wall Street dictating terms for the entire logistics industry is the Teamsters' UPS contract. Simply look to the competitors to see what corporations would do without a unionized counter-force: Amazon drivers are paid nearly minimum wage and get their hours cut next week if they do not meet inhumane production standards this week; FedEx is moving to eliminate all direct hires and switching to a 100 percent subcontractor model.

A two-week strike could [cost UPS about \\$3.2 billion](#). But more importantly, a strike at UPS would be the largest demonstration of working-class power seen yet in the post-Covid economy. Every worker could see that they have the power to win better conditions by collectively withholding their labor.

That result is what Wall Street fears the most.

Started a year ago

Our contract fight started nearly a year ago. Last August, we had contract kick-off rallies around the country. In the fall, we filled out contract surveys, affirming the popularity of ambitious demands. Over the winter, thousands of us stood at gates and in break rooms handing out Contract Unity Pledge Cards to build support for the major contract demands we're willing to strike over.

In the spring, we held Contract Action Team trainings around the country to map our workplaces, select picket captains, and develop organizing plans to engage our co-workers. And in the last month, rank-and-file TDU activists began petitioning at dozens of UPS "barns" to demand the company accept a higher national pension plan and raise part-time pay to \$25 an hour.

We're firm in our high expectations. We want to win the best contract in Teamster history—and if we have to, we'll be willing to hit the streets on August 1 to do it.

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Source: [Labor Notes](#)

