

Shutting Down Big Brown

An Anarchist Take on the UPS Strike

K-Dog

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For fifteen days this August 185,000 Teamsters shut down United Parcel Service, forcing the world's largest package delivery company to concede to all the union's major demands including wage increases, expansion of full-time job opportunities and union retention of the workers' multi-million dollar pension plan.

The strike, which pitted the largest union in the US against its biggest employer, was the most significant labor struggle in decades. It was widely seen as an attempt by organized labor to become a major player in society again after decades of concessions to corporations, shrinking membership, and declining influence with the rulers.

Over 80% of the parcels delivery business travels in UPS's brown vans, which translates into 8% of the US gross national product. The strike had an immediate impact on the economy, especially the massive retail chain stores.

The nature of UPS's business, especially its highly profitable "Next-Day Air" and "Second-Day Air" service made the company particularly vulnerable to a strike. UPS lost millions of dollars as packages sat in warehouses and customers had to look to other package shipping services.

Despite the pinch on deliveries, the strike was very popular among the working class. By highlighting the issue of UPS's increased use of lower-paid, part-time workers, while earning over a billion dollars annually, the teamsters successfully struck a chord among many who've been forced into this kind of work. The union presented the strike as a crusade for all working people, not just UPS Teamsters.

Life at Big Brown

Working for United Parcel Service is no joke, especially for the 60% of the workforce that labor part-time in warehouses loading, unloading, and sorting packages. Under UPS's management-by-stress, workers are expected to move packages that can weigh up to 150 pounds at a pace of 1,200 per hour. Not surprisingly, UPS has the highest injury rate in the industry; over a third of all employees were hurt in 1996 according to company reports.

The turn-over rate for these highly physical jobs is 400%, and those who stick it out average less than half the hourly wage of UPS full-timers; most bring home less than \$200 a week. The starting wage at UPS has been frozen since 1982 when the company successfully pushed through this two-tier system. Many workers have even taken on two UPS part-time jobs to make ends meet: full-time work under the same part-time pay.

United Parcel's turn towards lower-waged, part-time employees has brought about a change in the composition of the UPS workforce. More and more Black, Latino, Asian and immigrant workers are being employed as are increasing numbers of women. In Chicago UPS has brought in dozens of welfare recipients, largely Black women, as part of President Clinton's "welfare-to-work" scheme. Media coverage of the strike made the new look of the UPS workforce quite evident; Multi-racial/multi-national picket lines were the rule.

These workers face, in addition to the daily grind, racist and sexist harassment and discrimination. In California, dozens of African-American drivers have filed a lawsuit charging the company with systematic discrimination. None of these aspects of exploitation and oppression were taken up by the union during the strike.

The Strike

All across the country, UPS workers kept picket lines solid. The Teamsters' bureaucracy ordered members not to interfere with management's meager attempts at running things, but in several cities workers' rage at UPS boiled over into fights with management and police. At no time was the strike actually under the control of the oppressed who labor for Big Brown. At all times the Teamsters' bureaucracy retained control and never had their authority challenged from below. The only network within the Teamsters that exists separate from the bureaucracy is Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), a union-reform movement started by socialists years ago. TDU has tied itself completely to the Teamsters "reform" president, Ron Carey, and has no goals further than a "strong union," least of all the liberation of the oppressed masses.

The Strike at the Top

Big strike victories are rare for unions these days but the stars, planets and moons were perfectly aligned for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Of course a convergence of more material factors could also explain its victory.

Besides UPS's vulnerability, the solid support of the ranks and the popularity of the strike, two other major factors brought on the victory: The union bureaucracy's willingness to wage a struggle and the position of Clinton's federal government.

The fact that the Teamsters' bureaucracy was willing to wage a struggle at all stands out, and there are a number of reasons for this, though the plight of the part-timer played a much smaller role than the labor lords and the left would have us believe.

The Teamsters' president, Ron Carey, has been in a difficult spot. His reform slate barely won re-election over the notoriously corrupt and pro-company "old-guard" led by Jimmy Hoffa Jr. The old guard's control of many locals and district councils has kept the union divided and limited Carey's authority. Carey needed a big win to solidify and strengthen his position.

Ron Carey, along with the new AFL-CIO leadership, is also ideologically committed to rebuilding the labor movement, engaging in struggle and winning reforms. Carey and the new breed of bureaucrats would like to establish the unions as a "left pole" in society to keep things balanced and to head off more disruptive forms of resistance to capitalist restructuring such as riots and wildcat strikes. A revitalized union movement would obviously also increase the influence and power of the labor lords.

Another interesting aspect of this strike was the role of the US state. Hours after Teamsters first set up picket lines, UPS chiefs were pleading and demanding that the White House declare a national emergency and forcibly end the strike. It would take weeks for UPS to hire and adequately train scabs, and since the teamsters' lines seemed solid, the only way for the company to put pressure on the union was the threat of government intervention. Despite UPS' pleas and requests from the National Association of Manufacturers and the retail giants, Bill Clinton didn't budge; he refused to move against the Teamsters' strike. There are divisions among the oppressors about the best way to rule, and Clinton represents a section of the elite that has some concern that the push to downsize and disempower the US proletariat is too much, too fast and could have a destabilizing effect in the long run. Just as union leaders seek to channel peoples' resistance into their structures, Clinton needs to reinforce labor's ties to his Democratic Party.

Lessons for the Revolutionary Anarchist Movement

The strike at United Parcel Service was a good thing. A new generation got to witness the strength and leverage working people have when they withdraw their labor from the machine.

UPS is a particularly strong and arrogant corporation, and it felt good to give them a slap. But this struggle did not produce any autonomous workers' forms or movement, let alone any revolutionary ones.

A revitalized union movement that actually engages in real struggles for reforms will provide openings for anarchists to build a revolutionary movement. But as of right now there is no organized anarchist presence at UPS, or in any other industry. This needs to change. In the 1970s young radicals in the US sought to connect with the exploited by taking jobs in factories and other mass workplaces and trying to organize among militant workers. They brought with them the arrogant, authoritarian, Marxist-Leninist outlook that dominated radical circles back then and their experience was decidedly mixed. Still anarchists in North America should try to draw what lessons we can from that history, as well as from the current attempts by anarchists in Europe and Africa to participate in working-class struggles.

Anarchists could initiate or help build networks of independent, direct action groups in different industries, extra-union organizations that could relate to the unions when that made sense, without getting trapped in the reformist logic of trade unionism. Such organizations could have an independent radical life of their own, fighting around issues the unions won't touch (sexism, racism, speed-ups, harassment) using methods the unions won't consider (sabotage, slow downs, occupations, wild cats) for goals beyond the bureaucrats' boundaries (international anti-authoritarian revolution).

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