

Management safety violations preceded crash of UPS driver who suffered heat stroke behind the wheel, co-worker says

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A veteran UPS driver from North Texas recently spoke with the WSWs, following the recent death and injury of two Texas-based UPS drivers. Dangerous temperatures, made worse by the lack of air conditioning in warehouses and vehicles, are one of many routine safety problems which UPS workers across the United States confront.

These continue after the supposed “historic contract” pushed through by International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) leadership last year. Since then, the company has rolled out plans to automate or close 200 facilities, and package delivery drivers are still working without air conditioning.

Nolan, whose name has been changed to protect his identity, knew a worker involved in a traffic accident after he passed out behind the wheel of his vehicle due to excessive heat. The injured worker, stationed in Longview, TX, was picking up a relief shift in the McKinney, TX facility. Nolan noted that cross-facility assignments are prohibited: “This was a violation of contract. To reassign a driver, management needs union permission, and then they have to put out a [requisition] to hire new drivers.”

According to Nolan, the worker had called his supervisor to alert them that he “fell out”—he was suffering heat distress, vomiting and needed guidance.

Under safety protocols, the driver should have ended his route and sought medical care. Instead, the supervisor directed the driver to drive back to the hub. The worker later fell unconscious while driving on the highway, and crashed into a tree. He fortunately survived and is recuperating.

Since the driver was actually based in Longview, this drive was a suicide mission. “This brother had a two-hour drive back to Longview, plus whatever his commute was home.” He added, “He has a massive lawsuit on his hands.”

The struggle over safety

This injury followed the heat-related death of 37-year-old driver driver Luis Grimaldo on August 6, as well as the horrific death of Juan Chavez, 68, who fell into a trash compactor at a UPS Dallas facility in May, and numerous other fatalities and injuries aty UPS.

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), UPS was responsible for 1,142 severe workplace injuries between 2015 and 2022, the most of any US employer.

The issue over air conditioning for delivery drivers has become particularly acute, as global temperatures continue to soar. In the US, there has been a long-term shift in population to warm-weather states. Outdoor temperatures in Texas regularly exceed 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees celsius), and the backs of trucks can exceed 150 degrees.

In July, a 51-year-old USPS worker died in Fayetteville, North Carolina after riding in the back of a postal truck all day.

Nolan expressed frustration at how workers are blamed for the injuries caused by lax safety and speed-up: “Management tries to cover their asses with [Professional Crisis Management] rules and blame workers for safety, but if we actually worked to rule, this whole system would crash to a halt.”

UPS sellout contract

Last year, Teamsters officials told UPS drivers that a new contract had secured air conditioning for vehicles. This was a lie: the deal applies only to newly-purchased vehicles. Given that the company regularly keeps its vehicles in

operation for decades, this means that virtually nobody will receive air conditioning by the end of the contract.

To date only about six percent of UPS' 100,000 vehicles are equipped with AC. "Those vehicles are not for typical package delivery," states Nolan. "They're specialties like air drivers, driving smaller vans, delivering letters to offices."

Nolan details how UPS management feigned concern over heat safety, made token investments before the contract and purchased a massive back-stock of trucks that would be exempt from future AC requirements. "Three months before the contract, they started putting in coolers and ice machines, then fans, then bought these useless cooling sleeves. Then they bought 23,000 trucks with a 2023 VIN."

"Workers didn't have time to read the contract fully," Nolan said. "Management knew every single thing [the Teamsters] were going to bargain for, and they had [a strategy] in place."

Nolan blamed the Teamsters bureaucracy for the "massive loopholes" that provide UPS discretion over implementing temperature regulation in the future: "There's a clause in the contract that says AC is based on productivity. It's based on delivering certain volumes, which UPS totally controls. They have USPS, they have FedEx—places where they can dump deliveries to reduce volume."

He also blamed the Teamsters for not enforcing other clear provisions of the contract: "They told us we'd have no cameras in our trucks. We still have cameras."

Nolan decried the so-called "historic gains" of the 2023 contract, "The 'raise' to \$21 per hour was a joke. A few years ago, maybe, \$21 was something to achieve for, but today in Arlington, Texas this is nothing."

"The 'historic contract' is only historic for UPS," he concluded. "Historically, this is the most we've given back to [UPS] in concessions. And the [Teamsters bureaucracy] gave them the loopholes needed to violate every 'gain' they claimed."

McKinney rally used as media op for union local

In response to the serious accident at the UPS McKinney hub, workers staged a picket to demand AC in their vehicles. The picket was officially supported by Teamsters Local 767, who were fearful that it might escape their control.

"It's a political ploy by [Local 767 president] Dave Reeves," Nolan said of IBT's supposed support for the workers, "because there are local elections here." He continued, "If [Reeves] wanted to get something done, he

would have called all 400 workers to picket outside while he stayed in the building, raising hell to that center manager."

He cautioned workers raising union-provided signs, "It's all a media op by the [union bureaucrats] and management. And the workers lose every time."

Anger towards the Teamsters bureaucracy

Nolan reserved some choice remarks for Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien, who was elevated to the union's top post as a so-called "reformer" in the 2021 elections. O'Brien was instrumental in the sellout at UPS as well as the strike ban against railroaders in 2022. Since then, he has openly courted the extreme-right and Donald Trump, even speaking on the first night of the Republican National Convention.

"Sean O'Brien, visiting Trump and speaking at the RNC, thought he was pulling a fast one. But instead he hung himself with this contract and his media stunts. A small group of MAGA die-hards like him, but to the rest of [UPS] workers he's a joke," said Nolan.

Nolan said that O'Brien was an "insider" of the previous administration of James Hoffa Jr, "and splintered off to appear as an outsider." The Teamsters for a Democratic Union faction, he said, "posed as the Teamsters 'watchman,' but they're not the watchman. They're all insiders now."

"The only way it's going to get done," he concluded, is if "the rank-and-file stand up and say, 'No more. No more. The power is ours and we're going to take it.' We can suffer for a day, or suffer for life."



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