

Teamsters rebel!

By Mick Duncan



THE biggest strike in the USA for a quarter of a century has ended in victory for the strikers and for their union, the Teamsters.

The strike at United Parcel Service, the government distribution agency, involved 185,000 workers. The union's main demand was for the conversion of 10,000 part-time jobs into full-time jobs over a period of five years. UPS bosses offered to convert 1,000 jobs but were forced to concede to the union's full demand.

The strike is tremendously significant in two respects. It was a fight against "flexible" working practices and the super-exploitation of part-time and temporary workers. American bosses have led the way in the creation of a divided workforce, using insecure jobs with poor pay and conditions to undermine the confidence and combativity of the labour movement. What was most remarkable about this strike was the way the mainly full-time workforce stayed out in support of the demands of the

less well-paid part-timers.

Victory for UPS could begin to reverse the pattern of defeats that started with Reagan's 1981 attack on air traffic controllers. Since that time US trade unions have been on the defensive. Like the defeat of the miners in 1985 in Britain, the defeat of the US air traffic controllers set the tone for the industrial class struggle for two decades.

The Teamsters' President, Ron Carey, elected in 1991 after the rank and file succeeded in kicking out the corrupt, Mafia-linked, old guard, has described the period since 1981 as one in which the employers have "stepped on workers' rights".

He believes this victory will send "a signal that American workers are on the move again. This strike marks a historic turning point for working people in this country".

The Teamsters enjoyed widespread support throughout the 15 day strike. A poll released on Friday 15 August showed that 55% of Americans were on the side of

the strikers. Only 27% sided with the UPS bosses.

Perhaps the Blairites, so keen to learn from Clinton, should take another look over the Atlantic. They continually tell us that strikes are unpopular and that a "modern" trade union movement cannot succeed by using the kind of tactics like for example flying pickets, adopted by the Teamsters. The UPS experience shows how wrong they are. It shows that solidarity wins.

Another lesson for the British labour movement is that even where the working class has been quiet for some time, it still has the power to rise, fight back and score significant victories. If in Britain the Labour government fails to address the issues which in the USA led the UPS workers to take action — low pay and job insecurity — then British workers will have to follow the example of those at UPS. The New Labour government will face an angry fight-back.

The full implications of this victory are still unfolding. The key question now is how the lessons of this magnificent Teamsters' rebellion are assimilated by the broadest layers of the US working class. The US Marxists have much to do in spreading the gospel of solidarity among what still remains the most important working class on the planet.

For us in Britain the lesson is this: we can do it too!

Key facts

The union gains:

- 10,000 extra full-time jobs to be created over five years. Five-sixths of these jobs go to existing UPS part-time workers.
- £1 an hour increase for part-timers' starting pay.
- An increase in allocation of full-time jobs to existing part-timers from four-fifths to five-sixths.
- £3.10 a hour increase in full-time pay.
- Teamsters keep control of pension funds.

Cost:

- The strike cost \$650 million.
- UPS volume reduced to 10%.
- Backlog of 8 million packages.

What is Workers' Liberty?

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty organises to fight the class struggle on all levels — trade union and social battles, politics and the combat of ideas. We are active in workplaces, in trade unions, in the Labour Party, in single-issue campaigns, in student unions, and in debates and discussions on the left, aiming to integrate all these activities into a coherent effort for socialism.

"The emancipation of the working class is also the emancipation of all human beings without distinction of race or sex." Karl Marx

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