

Private shipping companies targets of worldwide action

FedEx, UPS, DHL and TNT—the world’s four largest package delivery companies—were the target of a “Global Delivery Day of Action” last month, organized by the International Transport Workers’ Federation to pressure the firms to respect the bargaining rights of all their employees, no matter where they work.

According to the ITF, which embraces nearly 700 air, rail, roadway and sea transport worker unions representing 4.5 million workers in 148 countries, the private shipping companies sometimes “are leaders in developing corporate responsibility programs, but [they] often fail to implement these across national boundaries.”

In other words, a UPS worker under a union contract in Germany might have better pay, benefits and job rights than an employee doing the same job for UPS in Singapore—or perhaps even in San Diego.

Hoping to level the playing field across the entire shipping industry, the ITF staged the day of action to call attention to labor unions’ impact in the global community, and also to foster cross-border relationships among union activists. The day’s events included:

- Lunchtime pickets in Johannesburg to call on DHL to treat all of its South African transport workers equally
- Pickets outside DHL, UPS and FedEx offices around India to demand a stop to harassment of workers in that country
- Organizing discussions between workers at DHL, UPS and FedEx and the Transport Workers’ Union of Australia
- Leafletting to transport workers in Hong Kong, Germany, Spain and Italy, as well as by members of the Teamsters in the United States

The Global Delivery Action Day was held in cooperation with Union Network International (UNI), a federation of more than 900 service and skilled-labor unions worldwide with which the NALC is affiliated.

“The NALC is proud to stand with our brothers and sisters in UNI and the ITF and supports their efforts to bring the benefits of organization and collective

bargaining to delivery workers throughout the world,” said NALC President William H. Young. “Our successes in our fight to ensure the job security and retirement benefits of letter carriers stands as a testimony to the power and strength of solidarity.”

FedEx is...an airline?

In the United States, a quirk of federal law makes it practically impossible for thousands of FedEx employees to join a union. The company is regulated by the Railway Labor Act, which also covers airlines, despite the extensive ground-based local delivery and long-haul trucks that are the backbone of its business. The government still classifies FedEx as an airline because of its fleet of cargo aircraft.

On the other hand, the NALC and other private delivery workers, including those at UPS, fall under the National Labor Relations Act. The key difference is that the Railway Labor Act requires a nationwide ballot before workers can form a union. Under the NLRA, a union can be created on a local or office-by-office basis.

Hoping to loosen the legal chokehold on FedEx workers, Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin introduced an amendment in December to a Labor Department appropriations bill that would require all express delivery workers be covered by the NLRA. Harkin, a good friend of the labor movement, also was the author of the Mail Delivery Protection Act, the measure to prohibit Contract Delivery Service.

Shortly after Harkin’s NLRA amendment was introduced, President Young sent a message to e-Activists in several states, urging letter carriers to contact their senators and ask them to support the amendment.

“It is especially important to letter carriers that workers from competing delivery companies have the ability to form unions and bargain collectively,” he said. “If they work for low wages and receive few benefits, our own position at the bargaining table is damaged.”

As this issue went to press, Congress was preparing to pass a massive stop-gap appropriations measure to keep the government running into the new year and it was uncertain whether Harkin’s language would survive.

Consequently, President Young asked activists to hold off on contacting their senators, but promised to keep letter carriers informed as developments warrant. (*To join the e-Activist Network, visit nalc.org.*) ☒

