

Labor in Focus by Marianna Wertz

Strikers reject 'post-industrial' economy

The Steelworkers and the Teamsters are fighting for jobs at a wage that can support a family.

The Teamsters strike against United Parcel Service, and the Steelworkers strike against Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel, settled on Aug. 3, signify that a "sense of reality" is coming back to the American people, who are turning away from the "post-industrial society" concept that has dominated America for the past 30 years, according to Lyndon LaRouche. Asked about the two strikes in a radio interview with "EIR Talks" on Aug. 5, LaRouche said, "What you're seeing among organized labor, and people around them, is that the effect of a sense of reality long lost, over the past decades, is coming back to the American people, and these movements around the labor movement are an expression of that cultural shift, back toward reality, toward real values, and this is a very important development."

The Teamsters, with full backing from the AFL-CIO, made a political decision to strike UPS at midnight on Aug. 3, and to use the strike to challenge what Teamsters President Ron Carey called "throw-away jobs." Carey, a former UPS driver and former head of a large UPS local in New York, said, "We're fighting not just for Teamster members, but for every working family in America. We have to stop big companies like UPS from shifting to 'throw-away jobs' that don't support a family."

Organized labor chose UPS as the target, because it symbolizes the destruction of labor power which is the hallmark of the "post-industrial economy." The main issue is the speed-up and labor-recycling mill which UPS has become, comprised largely of underpaid, part-time labor, and increasing of workfare recipients, whose

"salary" is subsidized by municipalities. Although UPS made huge profits last year, 83% of new UPS jobs and more than 60% of all UPS jobs are part-time, starting at \$8 an hour, with sparse benefits.

Speaking on Aug. 6 at a Chicago picket line, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney underscored the importance of this issue for all of America's workers: "UPS is a solid, profitable company that enjoys over 80% of the small package delivery business in our country. Because of the work of its dedicated employees, the company recorded more than \$1 billion in profit last year alone. When UPS refused to acknowledge their contribution and insisted on continuing to replace full-time jobs with part-time jobs, these workers made the decision to withhold their labor and go on strike. In doing so, they picked up the gauntlet on behalf of all American workers and their families, and their struggle is now our struggle. . . . We will dedicate whatever it takes . . . to teach UPS and, indeed, all of corporate America, a lesson in practical economics. Part-time America won't work!"

Management's latest proposal is for the right to increase the percentage of part-time workers, while creating only 200 new full-time jobs per year. The Teamsters are seeking to create thousands of new full-time jobs by combining existing part-time positions. The union is seeking subcontracting language that would ensure that UPS jobs grow as the company grows, which UPS rejects.

The same day that the Teamsters struck UPS, the United Steelworkers of America declared victory in their strike against Wheeling-Pittsburgh

Steel, the nation's ninth-largest steel company. This, too, was a political strike, against a company that had been turned into a looting operation by CEO Ronald LaBow, a New York speculator whose interest is "making money, not steel," according to those who know him best.

The principal issue was the company's unwillingness to accord its 4,500 workers dignity befitting a human being. The strike began Oct. 1, 1996, after Wheeling-Pitt demanded the elimination of seniority, craft, and contracting-out protections; the gutting of health insurance coverage; and that workers accept a paltry severance program masquerading as a "pension plan."

The steelworkers adopted a political, "in-your-face" approach to the strike, confronting the major stockholders of Wheeling-Pitt's parent company, WHX Corp., with Wall Street rallies, walking tours of the CEO's neighborhoods, and embarrassing visits to their homes. The USWA went so far as to announce a boycott of Mellon Bank, WHX's major stockholder.

The contract approved by the negotiating committee provides for industry pattern pensions, increased wages, signing bonuses, and weekly payments and health insurance, pending a return to work. As Jim Teague, Corporate Campaign Coordinator for the USWA, told *EIR* on Aug. 4, it was this "more aggressive style of organizing" that won the strike. USWA President George Becker summed up the importance of the victory: "This was a remarkable victory . . . because these workers and their families stood up to one of the most cruel and sophisticated anti-worker, anti-union campaigns in the history of the labor movement—and they did it as much for generations to come as they did it for themselves."