

# Back on track

**SSMRC millwrights and contractor MHS are getting the job done after taking over a 1.1 million-square-foot UPS distribution center from a non-union company.**

BY OLIVIA MCMURREY, COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR | PHOTOS BY GENE HOWARD

**W**hen a non-union contractor fell behind on a \$200 million project at a United Parcel Service regional hub spanning more than 1.1 million square feet in Arlington, Texas, Millwright Local 1421 helped turn around the job in time for the facility to process essential supplies for health-care workers at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis.

UPS announced in April of 2017 it would locate the regional hub in the Arlington Commerce Center, expand the facility by 200,000 square feet, and invest approximately \$105 million in business property, including conveyer-belt systems and other custom equipment. The company stated the hub was needed to support e-commerce expansion and the fast-growing north Texas business economy. The project was scheduled for completion in late 2018.

In March of 2019, when not even half the project was finished, Southern States Millwright Regional Council members working with contractor MHS Technical Services arrived on the scene. “The non-union contractor was so far behind and messed up so bad that UPS/MHS had to ask us to come in and fix it,” said Keith Branham, business agent for Millwright Local 1421 in Arlington.

The team corrected the previous contractor’s mistakes and had 50% of the facility operating by February of 2020, Branham said. The final phase of the project is slated for completion in November of 2020.

## Landing the project

After UPS let go the original contractor and requested bids from others, SSMRC leaders advised MHS, one of its long-time industry partners, on putting together a winning bid package.

“We don’t get the opportunity for our members to work at a new UPS facility that often, at a job that large, because they just don’t build them that often,” Branham said. “It was super competitive because it was such a large project. Light

conveyor is probably the biggest market in our jurisdiction, but it’s very rare for us to get in there because it’s a market a lot of non-union companies specialize in.”

SSMRC leaders listened to the contractor’s needs and collaborated with members of the union organization, from international executive board members to local business representatives and training staff, to deliver a solution. “We developed a plan to supply manpower that possessed the skill set needed to bring the jobsite back on schedule through aggressively tackling the issues at hand,” said Wayne Jennings, executive secretary treasurer of the SSMRC.

Gene Howard, a millwright foreman on the project and a Local 1421 member, said he is proud of his team’s ability to successfully replace a non-union contractor that couldn’t meet quality standards or production schedules. “Having people trained and getting a job completed on time and under budget is the best thing because that company will use us again as a union,” he said.

## Work scope

The UPS Arlington facility employs the latest technologies to route packages through a complex system of conveyors and a maze of belts. Advanced package-

scanning and sortation equipment directs items through the building and to proper loading doors. “Within two hours, a package goes completely through the system, from start to finish, and it’s already loaded back on another truck, ready to go,” Howard said. “That is quick production.”

Millwrights are installing all sorters and conveyors. “We are installing everything,” Howard said. “All the support steel. All the conveyor. All of the belts. All of the drive motors. All of the sorters. And we are building them from the ground up.”

Branham said he expects about 150 millwrights to work approximately 450,000 man-hours on the job by the time it’s completed. “This project has provided work for one-third of Local 1421’s membership,” he said.

The project made MHS the local’s top man-hour-producing



**ABOVE:** The UPS Arlington regional hub is known as the Lone Star facility. **RIGHT:** Local 1421 member Mike Stormont welds together framing.







Millwrights Chris Cantrell and Ronnie Ashley build an elevated system.

contractor of 2020, as of April, and its No. 2 man-hour-producing contractor in 2019.

Howard said the original contractor installed less than 10 percent of phase 1 conveyor equipment. “And in approximately eight months, we had the first half of the facility ready to go,” he continued.

### COVID-19 ramifications and precautions

Near the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, UPS began diverting shipments of medical equipment and masks from its Dallas hub to the Arlington center, Branham said. This reduced shipping time because the Arlington location, known as the Lone Star facility, was not as busy as the Dallas hub.

“It put the load on the new Lone Star facility that was about half completed,” Howard said. “But the half that was completed was ready to run, and they ran it.”

UPS and MHS are taking precautions to protect workers from the novel coronavirus. Tall barriers separate UPS employees from construction workers, who have their own building entrance/exit.

Because the facility is essential in shipping medical supplies to hospitals, a local distillery made hand sanitizer for workers and provided it in bulk, Howard said. Employees are assigned to disinfect tools, and the MHS safety team provides face masks and enforces their use as well as social distancing. “I’ve got to give thumbs up to our safety team,” Howard said. “The MHS safety team has been a wonderful asset. They’ve had face masks made specifically for MHS employees.”

Employees eat lunch outdoors, and separate lunch periods were designated for millwrights and members of other trades. Hand-washing stations were set up outside as well. Inside, UPS made three sets of restrooms available to con-

struction workers and provided staff to clean them multiple times a day.

### Customizing conveyors to fit an existing building

In addition to COVID-19-related issues and hurdles associated with following a contractor that was not prepared for the job, a major challenge at the UPS Arlington facility was outfitting a building that was not constructed to be a distribution center.

“Because of the way that it was built and the way that the column lines were set up, we had to reconfigure every piece of equipment that went into it,” Howard said. “We had to build around standing columns.”

Circumventing columns often requires “as-build” stack programs, Howard continued, in which millwrights install conveyor sets below or above each other, sometimes as high as 30 feet above the floor. “A column might be in the wrong place for a conveyor line to go through or the prints might call for a big electrical control panel to be in one spot, and we’re constantly having to move things because we are having to do these as-builds,” he said.

Multiple trades working at the same time – in order to com-

plete the project as quickly as possible – can be challenging as well, Howard said.

### Training opportunities and future work

Because the UPS Arlington project is so large, it has provided not only a wealth of man-hours for Local 1421, but a host of training opportunities for apprentices. More apprentices than usual are working on the project since so much manpower is needed.

Local 1421 leaders sent quality labor to the site and developed a comprehensive recruitment program to supply the additional apprentices needed, Jennings said. “When using adjusted apprentice levels, you have to recruit quality apprentices and you must have quality journeymen on the job-site mentoring those apprentices.”

The project has given apprentices a lot of hands-on training they’ll be able to use in the future, Howard said. “Hopefully this project will show the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, hey, Millwright Local 1421 is here, and we can take care of your conveyor issues,” he said. “And maybe that will help bring in even more industries that use conveyor systems and will use union labor.”

**“I could not be prouder of the millwrights on this project. They have truly shown that the Southern States Millwrights are safe, productive, and professional. I personally thank everyone on the project for their commitment to excellence.”**

– Wayne Jennings, executive secretary treasurer, Southern States Millwright Regional Council



**LEFT:** Zack Siddons [top left] gives instructions to apprentices Gabriel Gonzales [lower left] and Dylan Tindle. **RIGHT:** Mike Garrett prepares equipment for installation.