US postal workers denounce government negligence in anthrax attacks

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The discovery of anthrax contamination at mail centers in Washington, D.C. and New Jersey and the death of two co-workers have provoked widespread anger from postal employees. Workers are demanding to know why US authorities failed to issue timely warnings or take appropriate measures to protect them from exposure to the potentially deadly bacteria.

On Monday Joseph Curseen, Jr., 47, and Thomas Morris, 53—who between them had over 40 years of service at the Post Office—died from inhalation anthrax. Both men worked at the Brentwood Road mail-sorting center in the D.C. area, which processed an anthrax-laced letter addressed to Democratic Senate leader Tom Daschle. Two other Brentwood workers are seriously ill and have been hospitalized, authorities said.

In New Jersey state officials have released few details about a third postal worker with pulmonary anthrax, who worked at the mail-sorting center in Hamilton Township, near Trenton. The mail handler, a woman in her forties, reportedly worked near the machine that postmarked the contaminated letter to Daschle, as well as an earlier tainted letter to NBC-TV anchor Tom Brokaw. Two other postal workers in New Jersey, including a mail carrier from West Trenton and another worker at the Hamilton Township facility, have tested positive for anthrax on their skin, a less lethal version of the disease.

Postal workers were outraged by the callousness of government officials, and contrasted this to the extraordinary measures taken to protect politicians and their staffs in Washington, as well as media personalities in New York who may have been exposed to the bacteria. Many noted that police dogs at the Capitol were tested for anthrax exposure before workers at mail facilities which processed the tainted letters.

"When they found anthrax on Capitol Hill, they closed it," David Grant, a 29-year-old postal clerk, told the *New York Times*. "Five or six days later, they get to the post office. The mail that went to the Capitol went through the post office. Why did it take so long to get to us?"

"I'm just coming here now?" John Clark, a letter carrier from Hamilton told the newspaper. "It doesn't seem right. As soon as they found out there was any case, they should have locked the door, right then and there."

Workers expressed deep skepticism that either the Bush administration or postal supervisors particularly cared about their health and safety. Most of the information they had obtained, the workers said, had came from television news reports, not the government, and most of it was inaccurate.

The letter to Daschle was opened by one of his aides on October 15. Immediately afterwards the senator's office in the Senate Hart building was quarantined, the Capitol's mail system was shut down, public tours were suspended and 50 people, most them aides to the senator, were placed on prophylactic antibiotics. Hundreds of people who worked in or visited the building were given nasal swabs to determine whether or not they had been exposed. On October 17 congressional leaders shut down the House of Representatives and the Capitol remained closed until earlier this week.

The same day the anthrax letter was opened in Daschle's office, authorities realized it had passed through the mail center in Brentwood, which handles all District of Columbia mail, as well as the Trenton facility, which postmarked the letter. For a week, however, health officials and postal supervisors insisted that workers were not at risk because, they asserted, anthrax spores could not escape sealed letters.

Postal officials, reportedly acting upon the advice of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), decided not to test employees and kept the two facilities open. While congressmen and their staffs received treatment and time off, postal workers were kept in the dark about potential dangers and were neither tested nor given medical assistance.

Even before they became aware of the Daschle letter, officials knew workers at the Trenton facility had processed anthrax-laced mail. An earlier letter—this one addressed to NBC's Brokaw—had been discovered on October 12. Yet, even as two employees complained of feeling ill with symptoms consistent with anthrax, postal officials repeatedly assured workers environmental tests at the facility showed no signs of anthrax contamination. Workers were told the risk of exposure from handling the letter was "practically nonexistent" and testing was not deemed "medically necessary."

Action to protect postal workers was not taken until Sunday, October 21, after several more workers became ill. City officials in Washington began to test thousands of workers, but stopped Monday afternoon. After the deaths of the two workers

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were reported, the CDC instructed city officials to distribute antibiotics to all postal workers without testing first.

Authorities acknowledged they had underestimated the danger to post workers. Tommy Thompson, the secretary of Health and Human Services, announced his agency would immediately conduct environmental tests at post offices through which any letter containing anthrax had passed and offer antibiotics to everyone who worked there.

Officials acknowledged that mail-sorting equipment may have agitated powder inside envelopes and blowers used to clear the machines may have spread the anthrax spores. Thirteen out of 23 samples taken from work areas at the Trenton facility have since come back positive in preliminary tests. “Apparently, closed envelopes can transmit as well,” Dr. Jeffrey Koplan, the CDC director, told the Senate earlier this week.

When thousands of postal workers lined up for anthrax testing at D.C. General Hospital on Tuesday, October 23, they were told no additional testing was necessary. Instead they were given a 10-day supply of Cipro, the antibiotic used for treatment of anthrax exposure. Hospital officials were not on hand to answer any questions, including why postal employees were receiving just ten days’ worth of the antibiotic, while those who may have been exposed to anthrax on Capitol Hill were given doses of Cipro for 60 days.

Many workers expressed concern about why the government was handing out the antibiotic—which produces side effects such as diarrhea and nausea—without determining whether anyone had symptoms, since the White House said it would be counterproductive to take antibiotics if they had no contact with anthrax. “I feel like I’m an experiment,” Darryl Jones, a 27-year-old postal worker told the media. “Being tested was the purpose of being here.”

Postal workers could not turn to their unions for any support. In the days leading up to the two workers’ deaths, union officials were joining with the Postal Service and the Bush administration to downplay possible dangers.

Worried about the negative impact on the Post Office’s business, the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) issued a October 19 newsletter urging letter carriers not to wear protective gear, such as gloves and masks, because “this is not the visual image we wish to project to the citizens we serve.”

The APWU newsletter said a committee of Postal Service officials and union leaders that met daily was “concerned about projecting a sense of fear in the American public.” The Postal Service’s reputation “could be dramatically affected if it is perceived that postal employees fear the product that they deliver,” the union bulletin read.

In the aftermath of the postal workers’ deaths both Republican and Democrat politicians rallied to the defense of the White House in order to deflect charges of negligence.

Tom Ridge, director of the White House Office of Homeland Security, defended the work of CDC and FBI officials, saying, “they followed the line back as quickly and aggressively as they could.”

Ridge acknowledged but could not explain why one of the postal workers who died from anthrax had been originally sent home from the hospital with a diagnosis of the flu, although the White House claimed federal medical surveillance teams were “on the highest alert” for anthrax cases.

In an interview with CNN House Democratic leader Richard Gephardt did not criticize federal officials for not immediately testing employees, saying, “no one understood that the machinery at the post office and they way it worked might tend to get this stuff in the air.” Asked about postal employees’ charges of a double standard, Gephardt said, “There was not an understanding last week that the people in the post office were exposed. So maybe in a way, we are all having to learn something we don’t know enough about, but I think now people see the need to err on the side of caution.”

The Bush administration’s reaction to the threat to public health combined incompetence, negligence and damage control. This only underscores how little the so-called war against terrorism has to do with protecting ordinary people in the US. The anthrax attacks have been seized upon by the White House to justify its war in Afghanistan and a crackdown on civil liberties at home. While sparing no expense to prosecute a war in defense of American geopolitical interests, the Bush administration has again failed to take the most elementary precautionary measures to protect US citizens.

This is the latest example of the interests of the ruling elite taking priority in Washington. In the weeks since September 11 the White House has signed a multibillion dollar bail-out of US airlines—which does nothing for laid-off airline workers—intervened to protect the profits of drug giant Bayer, which has a monopoly over anthrax medicine, and backed an economic stimulus package that further slashes taxes for the rich.

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