New York City postal workers speak out on layoff, closure threats

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On December 13, the United States Postal Service declared a five-month moratorium on its plans for wholesale closures of Post Office stations and mail processing centers. The moratorium also covers the threat to scrap Saturday and standard one-day delivery services. The moratorium ends May 15, 2012.

Far from providing relief from the attacks on US postal workers, the moratorium threatens to augment them with potential congressional austerity "reform" legislation and concessions bargaining by the postal unions. The American Postal Workers Union already accepted $4 billion in concessions last May in a contract that imposed a two-tier system, a wage freeze and labor flexibility.

Using this takeaway agreement as a benchmark, management and the postal unions will now push for far more sweeping attacks on jobs, wages and working conditions.

Fredric Rolando, president of the National Association of Letter Carriers, hailed the moratorium as a "positive step" and urged that the time be used to find "efficiencies that make sense". Contracts for both the 200,000 letter carriers and 47,000 mail handlers expired November 20, 2011 and have been extended twice until January 20, 2012. The contract for 100,000 rural letter carriers has been in arbitration since it expired on November 20, 2010.

The December 13 moratorium delays the closure of nearly 3,700 Post Offices across the country. The closure list especially targets rural areas where Post Offices are important centers of town life, and a vital link for universal delivery service. USPS says this will eliminate another 100,000 jobs. This job cuts will come on top of the 110,000 jobs that USPS boasts it has already eliminated since 2008.

It also postpones the consolidation or closure of 252 mail processing and distribution centers. This would close or consolidate over half of the mail sorting centers nationwide at the cost of about another 30,000 postal workers' jobs. It would be a major step in undermining the universal standard of one-day delivery throughout the postal system.

Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe, an Obama appointee, proposed these vicious cutbacks to reverse a growing operating budget shortfall. According to USPS accounts, the Post Office has run up a $20 billion deficit over the last five years. In large measure, this budget crisis is government-created, the result of 2006 legislation requiring that the USPS pre-fund 75-year's-worth of its health and retirement plans in just ten years, instead of operating like most similar plans on a pay-as-you-go basis.

Compounding this are regulations that restrict USPS operations to the benefit of private delivery services such as UPS and FedEx. These companies, and Wall Street speculators, would be the prime beneficiaries of the breaking up and selling off in pieces of the postal service, a solution favored by large sections of the ruling elite, which sees the Post Office as an anachronistic impediment to the "free market" and private profit.

New York City is one of the areas facing the greatest threats from the cutback plan. Thirty-four of its Post Offices are slated to shut down, with 17 of these in the Bronx. The Oak Point Post Office on 149th St. in the Bronx has already been closed. The Crotona Post Office in the Bronx has also been taken out of service. The closure of a third Bronx Post Office, Van Nest, had been delayed by community opposition. The public hearing on another Post Office scheduled for closure in the Bronx went ahead last week even after the moratorium was announced.

The Queens Processing and Distribution Center has been targeted for closure. Opponents of the closure say 1,000 jobs will be lost. The mail processing centers in Brooklyn and Staten Island are also scheduled for consolidation or closure; while the Bronx Processing facility on 149th and Grand Concourse has already had a major consolidation into the Morgan Center in Manhattan in the late summer. Over 270 workers did the mail sorting at the Bronx Processing Center.

This consolidation has provided a glimpse of the impact that the sweeping closures and layoffs proposed by the USPS will have. As the Bronx News reported after the consolidation, "Because of the many complaints … This paper has not been arriving at our homes on Thursday. Nor does it arrive on Friday. In some cases, it has not arrived until one week later, which makes any announcements stale.

"The circulation department swears it mails out the copies on Tuesday. The slowdown appears to be the result of the closing down of the Bronx processing center. The paper has to travel down to Manhattan and return to the Bronx."

Luejenia Tedder, a postal worker with 26 years' service, told the WSWS, "There have not been a lot of layoffs here. But I don't think it is fair to be laying off 30,000 processing center workers or 135,000 postal workers.

"They have eliminated a lot of clerks from working on the second tour and moved them to the third tour. What we call the second tour means the same as what many people call the first shift. It starts at 8:30 AM and ends at 4:30 PM. I have been moved

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from the second tour to the third tour, which starts at 4 PM and ends at midnight. I would like to be back on the second tour."

David, a maintenance worker at the Morgan mail processing facility in Manhattan said, "I heard on the news they want to close down 250 processing centers. They have closed the Bronx Processing Center. Look at the Manhattan Main Post Office over there. It is only a skeleton operation. I'm not sure what is happening with the Brooklyn Processing Center, but they want to close Staten Island. They say they are remodeling Queens and its mail is coming here now. They may not close those processing centers all the way down, but most of their work is coming here.

"All this work is coming in, but they won't hire any more people to do the custodial work. They are abolishing whole departments here and parts of departments. They are disciplining workers like clerks and others by putting them in the blue room. They end up doing nothing there. It is just ridiculous that they said they were out to destroy 135,000 jobs."

Nezimel stressed the promise the government and Post Office had made to veterans, "I'll make a long story short. This is a veteran's job. But they are not hiring veterans for permanent jobs.

"What happens is there is a long registry of people waiting for permanent Post Office jobs that they are supposed to hire full time people from. But they are only hiring casuals now. They are making $15 an hour and can work for one year. They have no health benefits. They have no benefits at all. They have nothing. After one year you are supposed to be evaluated, but the Post Office lets them go and then brings them back after a couple of weeks to start another year as a casual at $15 an hour with no benefits."

Ariel said, "There really is no economic crisis at the Post Office that they are saying is the reason they have to close, cut and lay off so many. The politicians in Congress themselves put the Post Office in this bind because it doesn't have the revenue to meet expenses during the economic downturn and to fund all the postal workers' health care and pensions for the next 75 years in the ten years since they passed this law in 2006.

"I am a painter in the Post Office. There is work that we don't finish because we don't have the time, but management has plenty of time to harass you. One driver I know was fired by them just before he was about to retire. I had another friend with a hernia who was forced to continue moving heavy cases for a month. They gave me an assignment out of my job class to move things to a dumpster several streets away. Instead of moving the dumpster closer, I had to walk blocks on each trip to carry this stuff to the dumpster, and I am a painter. Are we slaves? Aren't we human beings?

"All of these managers should be let go. They are trained to harass us. A federal job should be a pleasant place to work, but it is not here. If you get hurt on the job, damn you if you try to fight for your rights. If you are hurt or you are sick, they make you go to a workers compensation doctor on Staten Island.

"The layoffs shouldn't happen like this. The Post Office is mismanaged. The supervisors don't develop craft skills. They are going to extremes in what they are calling for, and what they are doing is also screwing the public. They have locked down the Bronx, and brought their mail here. They are downsizing the postal service in the Bronx, Brooklyn and elsewhere. They are closing Post Offices, which eliminates service to the public in those neighborhoods. The Bronx GPO at 149th Street is being closed down this year. This is despite a rally that was held there to keep it open."

Mike, a mechanic at Morgan, related, "It is terrible. We are short-handed now. It has been quite a while since they hired anyone here, unless they are temporary people. This means I get extra work. We have four people to take care of two buildings. At one time we had 23 men. People retired or left for other reasons, and they were never replaced. It makes it difficult to keep these buildings safe. There are safety checklists that are made up for things that should be inspected and repaired. They just ignore them. I don't know if they are being done.

"There is more machinery here because they have brought it in from the Bronx. They have brought in 15 more machines. We have more work, but they only brought in a few maintenance people from the Bronx. And the ones who kept their job and came here, the Post Office downgraded their job classifications and cut their pay."

John, another mechanic, told the WSWS, "They are trying to destroy the Post Office. They are definitely trying to privatize it. The USPS is accomplishing these goals when the people they have running the Post Office don't know how to run anything. The management is clueless.

"The significance of the Post Office is communication. There is email and phone communication, but other than that there is the mail service. You have to have a top-flight mail system in a modern society. You still need First Class mail because your bills come first class, and many people pay them by mail. Paychecks and Social Security checks come by mail. How are you going to get that?

"I think tens of thousands of postal jobs have been eliminated nationwide already this year. The only thing left at the Main Post Office over there are the window facilities.

"This processing center, the Morgan Center, is the biggest in the world. The shifts used to be 5,000, and there were three shifts. It is my understanding that they have cut down shifts by taking people who are working on one shift and moving them to another shift. The 4 PM to 12 midnight shift is the busiest; so they are moving people to that shift. They are taking people off the morning shift because there is not quite a full flow of volume on every shift all day long like there used to be. Now they are using that to move people around.

"You thought when you came into the Post Office that you had a civil service job. And there was something like a government guarantee of lifetime employment. Now look what they are doing."

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