

US letter carrier dies after delivering mail in heat wave

Hector Cordon
5 September 2012

The death of an Independence, Missouri, letter carrier last month was recently confirmed by a Jackson County medical examiner as caused by heat exhaustion.

John Watzlawick, a 28-year postal veteran, was scheduled to deliver his regular mail route on July 24 and had been mandated to work an additional two hours of overtime that day. He collapsed while delivering mail on his route and was found by a passerby. The temperature in Independence was in the triple digits at 104 degrees Fahrenheit.

The previous day, Monday, Watzlawick, 57, had called management from the route and attempted to end his shift early because of heat-related illness. However, due to a shortage of carriers—according to the union—his request was denied by management. The high temperature that day was 105 degrees.

The medical examiner confirmed last week that the cause of death was heat exhaustion—hyperthermia—along with a secondary cause of a heart attack, most probably brought on by the hyperthermia. The report showed that Watzlawick's body temperature, measured at the emergency room where he was brought, had soared to 108 degrees—10 degrees above normal.

According to *The Kansas City Star*, his wife, Kay Watzlawick, was angered at postal management's refusal to grant his leave request. “‘I think he should have come home that Monday and stayed off Tuesday,’ she said, adding that her husband did not want to press the matter with postal management because he thought he would be harassed or intimidated.”

The *Star* quoted a postal spokesman as stating in response to the death, “letter carriers are reminded to dress appropriately in the heat, to stay hydrated and to take breaks when they need to.”

Postal facilities across the country are understaffed as

the United States Postal Service (USPS) continues to carry out a severe downsizing of its workforce and facilities. Last May, it announced the implementation of a once-postponed program to consolidate 48 mail processing facilities this July and August. This is to be followed by the consolidation of 181 centers in 2013 and 2014. The USPS hopes to save \$1.2 billion a year by this measure. About 28,000 postal workers will lose their positions through these cutbacks. By 2016, the agency plans to cut \$22.5 billion in costs.

The investor's blog *24/7 WALLst* placed postal jobs at the top of the 10 most disappearing occupations by 2020. Citing a Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) study, the blog reported on August 29 that of the present 524,000 USPS employees, “the BLS expects that number will decline by nearly 140,000, or 28%.” Letter carrier positions are projected to decline by 19 percent.

In a “Discussion Draft” sent to Congress last year, the USPS determined that “the Postal Service can only afford a total workforce by 2015 of 425,000, which included approximately 30% lower cost, more flexible, non-career employees.”

The Postal Service's 2012 third quarter report declared that it is continuing to cut costs by reducing work hours and increasing employee productivity. “‘The Postal Service has successfully improved productivity while removing nearly \$14 billion from its annual cost base during the past five fiscal years,’ said Acting Chief Financial Officer Stephen Masse.”

A July USPS report, showing a loss of \$1.89 billion, reveals that salaries and benefits have dropped 1.2 percent year-to-date (2.8 percent for the quarter) while work hours have decreased 2.1 percent year-to-date. For letter carriers, work hours have fallen by 2.2 percent.

According to a National Association of Letter

Carriers (NALC) posting on its web site, the “total factor productivity” of postal workers has increased by 19 percent since 1972. The bulletin cited significantly lower productivity increases for similar private sector industries.

The ability of the Postal Service to impose job cuts and increased workloads is due to the four postal unions working hand-in-glove with management in order to maintain their dues-gathering position. The death of John Watzlawick is a case in point. The response of the NALC’s national business agent, Dan Pittman, was to cover for the Postal Service. According to the *Star*, “Pittman said the Postal Service’s troubled financial situation isn’t making things easier for employees and, with downsizing, branch managers are finding it more difficult to find substitute carriers.” He stated, “You can’t just say, ‘Well, it’s too hot out there,’ because we work in all kinds of climates, including the dead of winter. But if it’s getting critical, take the mail back.”

Pittman has nothing to say about the widow’s statement of her late husband’s fear that he could be “harassed or intimidated” by postal management if he had insisted on his right to take sick leave, or on the lack of hiring by the USPS to fill vacant positions.

While the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the USPS are investigating the death, there is no indication from the NALC— either from the *Postal Record* or from other public sources—that it intends to conduct an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death of one of its members, specifically the refusal of the Postal Service to grant Mr. Watzlawick’s request to return to the post office in order to escape the extreme heat.

Such an investigation should be undertaken by a rank-and-file committee of postal workers as part of a defense of the right to safe working conditions.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact