

US Postal Service announces plan to end Saturday mail delivery

James Brewer
7 February 2013

Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe announced that the US Postal Service (USPS) intends to end Saturday delivery of first class mail. The postal service says that by August, it will implement the policy in order to cut its budget by \$2 billion annually, at the cost of 22,500 jobs.

At a Washington press conference on Wednesday, Donahoe declared that the measures were only part of a package necessary to overcome a deficit of close to \$16 billion last year. The decision was made unilaterally by USPS management without the explicit approval of Congress, which technically has the authority to decide postal service obligations.

Specifically, the proposal is to end all Saturday mail delivery while continuing package delivery and delivery to post office boxes. Post offices, which have already undergone consolidation and shortening of hours last year, will remain open.

Postal management claims that this will save 45 million work hours, or 22,500 jobs, but will be done with attrition and elimination of overtime, rather than layoffs. Combined with previous cuts and consolidations, the move will mean additional workload on existing employees. Since 1999, the USPS workforce has been cut by more than 300,000.

In his remarks to the press Wednesday, Donahoe repeatedly emphasized that the USPS receives no taxpayer money “nor do we want to go that route.” Insisting that customers and employees “want us to do the right thing,” he pointed to a *New York Times/ABC News* survey that reportedly found 7 in 10 people support the elimination of Saturday deliveries in order help defray the losses of the USPS.

He said the “good news” was that there are several weeks before the expiration of the continuing resolution, the joint agreement of both houses of the US

Congress governing federal appropriations, on March 27. This will give time, according to Donahoe, to air and resolve any differences which may emerge over the legality of the five-day mail proposal.

Responding to the announcement, Fred Rolando, the president of the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) union, called for Donahoe’s resignation, declaring that the move “flouts the will of Congress, as expressed annually over the past 30 years in legislation that mandates six-day delivery.” He said the union was “exploring all legal and political options to block Donahoe’s gambit.”

This is little more than posturing on the part of the NALC, which, together with the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) and National Postal Mail Handlers Union, has allowed for repeated attacks on postal workers over the past four years. In 2011, the APWU ratified a contract that surrendered a no-layoff clause and instituted a second tier of workers, “Non-Career Assistants,” who receive lower pay and no benefits.

The Obama administration had already made it clear in his budget proposal almost a year ago that it supported the cutting of Saturday service.

The Postmaster General claims that these “drastic measures” have to be taken in order to save the postal service from the loss of revenues due to email and e-commerce. While it is undeniable that electronic communications have resulted in reducing mail, this is merely a diversion from the overall economic processes which are leading to the dismantling of the US infrastructure and privatizing the postal service. In fact, with mail volume of 167 billion pieces per year, the USPS delivers between 40 to 50 percent of the total *global* volume of mail.

The post office was established by rule of law in the

US Constitution in 1787. Benjamin Franklin was elected postmaster general even before that by the Constitutional Congress in 1775. In 1792, it evolved into the first cabinet-level Post Office Department under Franklin and the postmaster general was included in the presidential succession.

Saturday delivery of mail has been mandated by Congress for more than 150 years.

The USPS is now an independent agency of the federal government. Established in 1971, it is the successor to the US Postal Department, which was funded by Congress. That ended when the Postal Department was transformed into the USPS under the Nixon Administration in response to a bitter nationwide strike by postal workers in March of 1970. The strike directly challenged the government, defied the union leadership and ended only when Nixon deployed thousands of US troops to man the New York City postal system. (See: “US: Forty years since the national postal strike”.)

The severing of ties with the government was a major step in the direction of the privatization of the postal service. Under the Obama administration, the economic crisis has been used as a justification to gut services and payroll.

The goal of the USPS management is to reduce labor costs to that of the for-profit United Parcel Service, which spends 53 percent of revenues on labor costs, and FedEx, which spends 32 percent. These private companies are under no legal obligation to provide daily delivery service to the 150 million individual addresses in the US, a mandate that makes the USPS service less profitable, and truly universal.

Employing over 500,000, the USPS is the second-largest employer in the US after Walmart. The postal service has an average attrition rate of 30,000 per year, this year exceeding 40,000. With an aging workforce—22 percent of whom are military veterans—health and pension funds have become a major political target.

In 2006, Congress passed the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act, transferring the responsibility for payment of postal service retiree health and pension plans from the federal government to the postal service itself by 2017. The law required the postal service to calculate future retiree benefits and pay what amounted to billions into a fund. According to Donahoe, \$11

billion of its \$16 billion dollar deficit was due to this payment.

Although postal service management has sought to downplay the effects of cutting Saturday delivery, clearly reducing the mail week by a day will have disruptive consequences, particularly for many small businesses, elderly people, and rural communities that rely on the mail to pay their bills, and receive checks and deliveries. Thousands of pensioners, disabled, and poor residents will be forced to wait for social security checks, health care paperwork, and other essentials. On weeks where there are holidays falling on Monday—six per year—there are three-day periods where mail will not move at all.

The destruction of the postal service, part of the degradation of US social infrastructure as a whole, is an expression of the decay of American capitalism. Individual hedge fund investors and Wall Street bankers rake in more in a year than the budget gap of the postal service and many other basic social provisions. That the richest country in the world is among the most unequal is a fact increasingly apparent in the disrepair of its critical infrastructure and social conditions.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact