US Postal Service announces new attacks on workers

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The US Postal Service (USPS) Board of Governors issued a statement on April 10, calling for "reopening of negotiations with the postal unions," citing "extreme circumstances and the worsening financial condition of the Postal Service." At the same time, it announced the USPS was "delaying the implementation" of its plan to discontinue Saturday mail delivery in order to save $2 billion a year.

The last round of contract negotiations already resulted in drastic concessions from postal workers, introducing and expanding the use of two-tier wages, and increasing health benefit expenses from workers whose wages are stagnating. The call to renegotiate the existing contracts means even more draconian attacks on workers' jobs and living standards.

Both of the largest postal unions, the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) and the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC), have responded to the USPS statement with complacency, sowing illusions that the temporary back down on ending Saturday mail delivery was a victory won by appealing to the Democrats and the courts.

NALC President Fredric Romano said, "NALC is gratified that the Board of Governors has seen the light on the law—but it is time for them to reconsider their entire 'shrink to survive' strategy." After calling the order to reopen contracts, "insulting and unnecessary," he said the existing agreement already "reduced starting pay by 25 to 33 percent and allows for major health care savings, provides for several labor-management task forces to work on ways to increase revenues and cut costs."

APWU President Cliff Guffey called on Congress "to oppose USPS plans to dismantle the mail processing network with the same fervor they showed when the Postal Service announced it would eliminate Saturday mail delivery." Guffey referred to the USPS's accelerated plans to shut down and consolidate mail processing capacity. He called on his membership to "contact their members of Congress to seek support for real postal reform."

Both Romano and Guffey accept the premise behind the cost-cutting measure being put forward by USPS management and the political establishment—that workers must sacrifice to ensure that the Post Office is profitable. Postal workers, on the other hand, have shown their willingness to fight these cuts. On March 24, postal workers demonstrated across the country against the plan to end Saturday mail delivery.

The USPS has been the object of budgetary attacks for years. As an independent agency of the US since its reorganization in 1971, the USPS hasn't received direct federal funding since the 1980s. USPS management, as well as both Democrats and Republicans, are adamant that the government no longer fund the operations of the postal service.

The threat of a USPS bankruptcy is continually held over the heads of employees and the population like the sword of Damocles. This is a patent fraud, used to impose ever-deeper cuts on the conditions of postal workers and retirees and to justify a drive to complete privatization.

The $16 billion shortfall cited by management included more $13 billion in payments to the federal Retiree Health Benefits to prefund retiree benefits for the next 75 years. These payments were mandated by the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act (PAEA), passed by the Republican-controlled Congress in 2006. The mandate—which has never been imposed on any other government agency or private corporation for that matter—meant federal responsibility for postal employee retirement benefits would be transferred to

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the USPS within 10 years. The aim of this measure was to bankrupt USPS and hand over delivery service to private companies like UPS and FedEx.

This means that the legal requirement for the government to provide efficient postal delivery service to every citizen was established shortly after the American Revolution must be ended. The Postal Reorganization Act of 1970—signed by President Richard Nixon after the wildcat strike by postal workers—was the first step in breaking up the monopoly of post office and opening the door to the privatization schemes currently being championed by the Republicans, with tacit if not open support from sections of the Democratic Party.

Only last February, when Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe announced the plan for "modified Saturday delivery" he claimed that the USPS did not require the approval of Congress to adopt the cut in delivery service, apparently ignoring the precedent that Congress, which oversees the delivery of mail, has mandated Saturday delivery service for the last 150 years. Now, in its latest statement, USPS management states, "By including restrictive language in the Continuing Resolution, Congress has prohibited implementation of a new national delivery schedule for mail and packages."

Darrell Issa, the right-wing Republican Congressman who heads the oversight committee that presides over postal delivery, immediately expressed his disappointment on the USPS reversal. In a statement issued the same day, he said, "This reversal significantly undercuts the credibility of Postal officials who have told Congress that they were prepared to defy political pressure and make difficult but necessary cuts."

Issa continues, "when USPS announced that it would alter Saturday delivery service, it made no mention that this change could only occur if Congress eliminated an old and well-known provision of law. Despite some assertions, it's quite clear that special interest lobbying and intense political pressure played a much greater role in the Postal Service's change of heart than any real or perceived barrier to implementing what had been announced."

The USPS is a prime target for privatization because of its value as a potential acquisition. It is, next to the federal government and Walmart, the third largest civilian employer in the country, with the largest fleet of vehicles in the world. Republicans and Democrats are united in their determination to make postal workers pay for the so-called crisis of the USPS.

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