

US Post Office to close 82 mail processing centers

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On January 10, the United States Postal Service (USPS) will begin closing 82 mail processing centers throughout the country. The move will further impact the service of the USPS, which has repeatedly slashed its budget and shed over two hundred thousand jobs in the last decade. The USPS anticipates that the closures will impact 15,000 employees and save \$750 million per year.

The 82 facilities slated for closure represented more than one quarter of the post office's remaining 320 processing centers. The processing centers are being closed as part of the rollout of the second phase of the Postal Service's "Network Rationalization Initiatives," which began in 2012. The program was established as part of five-year plan by the Postal Service calling for \$20 billion in cuts by 2015. The Postal Service has already closed 143 processing facilities under the program, in addition to eliminating 3,800 delivery routes and reducing operating hours at 9,700 post offices over the past three years. Since 2007, 22,000 city delivery routes have been reduced or eliminated.

The closures will increase average delivery times and slash overnight delivery for first class mail. According to the post office, only 20 percent of all first class mail will be delivered overnight under the new changes, down from 41.2 percent in 2012 before the closures began. Forty-four percent of first class mail will now take three days to arrive. The post office itself estimates that the average delivery time for first class mail will increase from 2.14 to 2.25 days, or around 5 percent.

The precise impact of the closures on mail service is not known because the post office has not completed the impact studies for any of the 95 facilities due to take on operations from the closed processing centers. This is because the agency had not yet finalized new service standards for affected services despite

beginning the revisions in 2012. The new standards are due to be completed mere days before the closures are set to begin. A spokesman for USPS told the press that they would not update the impact studies until after the closures have already begun.

The Postal Service, which has not received federal funding since the early 1980s, has been hemorrhaging money for years. In 2014, USPS lost money for the eighth straight year, posting a \$5.5 billion loss despite an increase in revenues. Although revenue from its packaging business has been increasing, total mail volume has declined by 27 percent since 2006, driven primarily by new communications technologies such as the Internet as well as the recession of 2008.

USPS management has responded to this crisis through savage attacks against its workforce. The agency has shed more than 300,000 jobs since 1999, despite the formal prohibition of layoffs in union contracts. While the postal service claims that these cuts occur without layoffs, the reality is that multiple facilities have been closed—with the support of the unions—and workers left to find job openings in other facilities. If any jobs are available they may be hundreds of miles away, forcing workers to uproot their families. The agency has also defaulted four times in the last three years on multi-billion dollar payments to its employee retirement fund.

A USPS memorandum warned that the closures would have a significant impact on service and reported that in the recently-implemented consolidation of the Huntsville, AL, processing facility into the Birmingham processing center "nearly 70 percent of carriers were delivering mail after 5 pm." Local news outlets have reported mail being delivered to homes as late as 9 pm. Alongside working longer hours under difficult conditions, the injury and illness rate for postal

workers increased to 6.34 per hundred workers in 2014—a 12 percent increase over the previous year.

Postal workers have been forced to work harder. Productivity has soared nearly seven percent since 2009, with a total productivity increase of 24.6 percent since 1972.

The postal service has aggressively expanded its “Village Post Office” (VPO) program, replacing closed and reduced-service Post Offices with for-profit businesses providing USPS services. Four hundred VPOs were opened in 2014 alone. USPS is also participating in a plan to offer postal services at 1500 Staples stores in partnership with the USPS “Approved Shipper” program.

The response of the American Postal Workers Union has been to launch an impotent and ineffective boycott of Staples. This allows them to posture as fighting the ongoing privatization of the postal service while the USPS continues with the dismantling of infrastructure and the destruction of jobs.

The total number of career USPS employees stood at 488,000 in 2014 the lowest level since 1966, a year when the US population was less than two-thirds its present size. Non-career employees—lacking any benefits—currently comprise 26 percent of total employment.

Democrats in the outgoing Senate have been grandstanding in recent months against the closures. In August, an open letter to the Senate Committee on Appropriations was circulated by Vermont senator Bernie Sanders calling for a one-year moratorium of post office facilities closures. Nothing resulted from the letter, despite a Democratic majority on the Committee and the fact that a majority of the Senate had signed the open letter, underscoring the fraudulent character of the Democratic Party’s opposition to the cuts.

In December, a group of 30 senators, all but one of them Democrats, published an open letter to Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe requesting the closures merely be delayed until the impact studies are completed. The letter has thus far been virtually ignored by the post office, with the agency only promising a response at some indeterminate point in the future.

At no point in either letter was the suggestion raised that the closures should not happen at all. In reality, the attack on postal workers is part of a bipartisan

campaign by the ruling elite to make the working class pay for the crisis of capitalism.



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