

Arbitration decision in US Postal workers contract expected soon

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The American Postal Workers Union (APWU) has announced that a contract for over 200,000 workers may be announced as early as mid-July. A final arbitration session of a committee including a union representative, a United States Postal Service (USPS) management representative and a third, “neutral” arbiter, Stephen B. Goldberg, took place on May 4. Hearings on the contract began in February.

There is every reason to believe that the new agreement will be another multi-tier, takeaway contract. The USPS has proposed a third, lower pay tier for new workers and is seeking to accelerate the process of transforming the postal workforce into low-wage, casual labor.

In a speech to the arbitration panel in February, APWU President Mark Dimondstein noted that management is seeking to “expand rather than eliminate and reduce the non-career work force.” In a warning to the USPS that such a move could lead to unrest by postal workers he noted that the “two-tier wage structure in the auto industry was the key issue of the recent [October and November] negotiations of the UAW and the big three auto companies. It was the key demand of the rank-and-file autoworkers—and had it not been satisfactorily addressed in bargaining, would have indeed led to strikes this past year.” Dimondstein also warned that workers are disturbed that management has proposed the elimination of the Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA).

These admonitions are motivated by a deep-seated fear within the APWU bureaucracy of a rebellion by the rank-and-file, which was, no doubt, a factor that lead the union to endorse the candidacy of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders for the Democratic Party presidential nomination.

Postal workers, and indeed the whole US Postal

Service, have been under constant assault for years. The 2010-2015 contract froze wages for the first two years and imposed a 30 percent cut in health care. The first two cost of living increases were cancelled, and the third and fourth were deferred. This contract created a second tier of workers, and cut the top pay by five to eight steps. In the old contract, full-time work was redefined as 30 hours a week, and the non-career workforce in the APWU was expanded to 30,000 workers. According to government figures that contract slashed postal clerks’ compensation by \$4 billion.

The USPS has received no federal funding since the 1980s and has shed more than 300,000 jobs since 1999, despite the formal prohibition of layoffs in union contracts.

In 2015, 82 postal facilities were shut with the loss of 15,000 jobs. The Postal Service had previously shut down 143 processing facilities under a special five-year program, eliminated 3,800 delivery routes and reduced 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 union, which has collaborated with the USPS in all of the attacks on its own members and the public more broadly, is now doing everything it can to implement a further round of cutbacks. It has said little or nothing about the actual content of the arbitration proceedings and has ruled out the possibility of a strike.

The imposition of a likely concessionary contract on postal workers follows the ratification of a sellout agreement by Verizon workers, whose seven-week strike was isolated and betrayed by the Communications Workers of America.

In his speech to the arbitration panel Dimondstein in February conceded that the vote for the 2010 contract “was carried out in a rapid fashion with little time for

digesting, debating and reflecting on the massive changes agreed to by the parties. Furthermore, the vote took place in a climate of uncertainty, confusion and fear.” Workers should expect similar tactics by the union to force through this year’s arbitration settlement.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of postal workers at the Morgan Processing Center in New York City.

Daisy, with 30 years of service, told the WSWS, “We didn’t get anything in the last contract. Overall, things have changed so much here, and it starts with the way the union conducts itself with the workers. That support isn’t there like it used to be. Once we had a union, but not anymore.

“We need better wages and health insurance. They want you to pay for most of your benefits now. We should get together. The working class here should get together like in Europe.”

Gary explained, “The Post Office wants rollbacks in benefits. I read this in the notices on the Bulletin boards. For new employees, they want a new wage structure and worse pensions. They have two tiers of employees now, and I think they want a third with this contract. The starting and top wages are being lowered again for new employees.

“I disagree with two tiers of workers, but the union has been going along with it. They say it is what is being done nationally now, like with the autoworkers. We are not going along with this like last time.

“It is unfortunate you have to choose the lesser of two evils in the election. I am a Democrat. When one is going to take 20 percent away from you and the other is going to take 30 percent away from you, you choose the one taking 20 percent.”

Frances has 27 years’ service, and she quit the union nine years ago. She said, “We didn’t get a raise in the last contract. With this contract, the Post Office and the union tell us what they want when they want to tell us. I blame this mainly on the union. I left the union because they weren’t doing anything for me, and the union hasn’t gotten any better since then.

“I think postal workers should all be together, with contracts should running together. We would be stronger.”

The National Postal Mail Handlers Union is the bargaining agent for 50,000 workers at the US Postal

Service. Its contract expired May 20 and the union has agreed to extend negotiations “indefinitely.”

Diana is a mail handler who transferred to the Morgan center after they closed the Bronx processing center in 2011. She commented, “They are consolidating the workforce, and I think they are selling the building. If they do sell the building, we will all be excessed out again. They sold the processing center building in the Bronx, and they made us bid to go to the Manhattan facility or to Long Island. I had enough seniority to come here, which is a lot closer than Long Island. I don’t know what is happening with the Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island processing centers that have been threatened with consolidation or closure.”

Another mail handler remarked, “I was born and raised in New York City, and I don’t want to have to move out. So I keep asking our shop stewards what is happening with our contract, and I get nothing.”

Mikie, also a Mail handler, recounted, “They pushed our contract back so it won’t be decided this year. I’m not informed about what is in the contract. However, they should give us a raise and stop cutting our jobs. If they have jobs for overhead management, they shouldn’t be downsizing us. They are replacing people with MHAs who are Mail Handler Assistants and PSEs who are clerks in the APWU. Both of these are another tier in our unions and temporary. They are like casuals with no rights. We should come together and merge our strength to fight this.”



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