

As APWU keeps workers on the job

US Postal Service workers protest Trump's privatization plans

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12 October 2018

On Monday, thousands of postal workers in more than 140 cities across America protested plans by the Trump administration to privatize the US Postal Service (USPS). The protests were organized by the four postal unions, including the largest one, the American Postal Workers Union (APWU), which has kept its 200,000 members on the job weeks after the expiration of their contract on September 20.

In April, the White House created a task force led by the Office of Management and Budget to investigate the USPS's finances and operations on the grounds that it is a "failing" governmental agency. In its report, the administration proposed to "restructure the U.S. Postal System to return it to a sustainable business model or prepare it for future conversion from a Government agency into a privately-held corporation."

The restructuring of the USPS or its outright privatization would accelerate the attack on the wages, pensions and health care benefits of an estimated 650,000 postal workers. It would also allow private investors to plunder the resources of the postal service for profit while increasing costs for consumers and reducing mail delivery services.

"They want to privatize the postal service to make money and profits from us, pay us less, take our pensions and cut our jobs," Frank, a postal worker protesting in Chicago, told the WSW. "We deserve good benefits and good pay. In a city like this, you got to pay a pretty penny to survive."

Postal workers have already faced decades of attacks on their living standards under Democratic and Republican administrations, with the complicity of the postal unions. Both parties have forced USPS into a race to the bottom with workers at Amazon, United Parcel Service (UPS), FedEx and other logistic giants. Rather than uniting USPS workers with their brothers and sisters throughout the industry, particularly 250,000 workers at UPS who are locked in a battle against the Teamsters union, the APWU has kept workers on the job past the contract expiration and pledged

to submit to a federal arbitrator if no agreement on a new contract is reached with the government.

According to the Trump administration report, "A private postal operator that delivers mail fewer days per week and to more central locations (not door delivery) would operate at substantially lower costs." Such a plan would end the universal service obligation of the postal service to deliver mail to residents and businesses across 150 million addresses six days a week. It would also decimate rural postal services and force residents in poorer remote areas to travel many miles to pick up mail from consolidated post offices.

The administration is following the so-called "European model," and in particular the lead of the German and British governments, which have privatized postal services over the last two decades. This has resulted in a substantial reduction in services and higher costs, along with attacks on the jobs, living standards and working conditions of postal workers, accomplished through the collaboration of the unions.

Trump is not the first to promote such a reactionary course. Efforts towards privatizing the USPS and other federal agencies have been floated by both big-business parties, dating at least to the wildcat strike of postal workers in 1970.

Following Wal-Mart as the second largest employer in the country, the USPS is an independent agency of the federal government that receives no tax dollars. The USPS was formed in 1971 to be run like a business in the aftermath of the 1970 strike, replacing the US Postal Department, which was funded by Congress and had been a cabinet department of the executive branch since 1872.

The transformation of the Postal Department into the USPS was the first step towards privatization of the postal service following the 1970 wildcat strike. During the eight-day walkout, 200,000 postal workers demanding higher wages and better working conditions defied threats of court injunctions and the union bureaucracy of the National

Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) and other unions. The massive strike, which began in New York City, spread to dozens of cities, and threatened to cripple the US economy.

The strike brought postal workers into a direct confrontation with the state, as the Nixon administration deployed the US military to run the postal operations in New York. Nixon avoided a direct attack on the postal workers by US troops, fearing a broader explosion of the working class. Despite the enormous courage of the rank-and-file postal workers, the strike ended in a betrayal with the complicity of the union bureaucracy. The workers received marginally higher wages, but it was not enough to keep up with the rising inflation generated by the Vietnam War and other causes. NALC also agreed to no-strike clauses and for all future contracts to be overseen by federal arbitration.

The four unions currently representing 650,000 postal workers, including the APWU and NALC, have done nothing to stop decades of attacks on postal workers and efforts to privatize the postal service. They have overseen thousands of job losses and numerous concessions contracts. In 1999, there were more than 900,000 postal workers. More than 250,000 jobs have been cut since then, close to a 28 percent reduction. Following the 2008 economic crisis, the Obama administration oversaw the slashing of billions in labor costs and the reduction of more than a hundred thousand jobs.

The Trump and Obama administrations have exploited falling USPS profitability—driven by low-wage competitors like Amazon and UPS and reduced funding—to justify further cuts and privatization efforts. USPS has lost tens of billions over the last decade, decimated by the 2006 Bush administration Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act, which was supported by Democrats. The Act forced USPS to pre-fund its retiree health costs, which are estimated to be near \$5.6 billion over a decade, although no other federal agency is required to do so.

Since defaulting on payments in 2011, the USPS has been unable to pay billions in retiree health care obligations. The billions required for retiree benefits and for good pay and benefits for current USPS workers could easily be paid for by ending the squandering the trillions on US imperialist wars, Wall Street bailouts and huge tax cuts for giant corporations and the super-rich, like billionaire Amazon owner Jeff Bezos.

The APWU-USPS contract covering more than 200,000 USPS clerks, maintenance workers and motor vehicle workers expired on September 20. There is overwhelming support among workers for a struggle, but the APWU is doing everything to prevent such a struggle. The unions are particularly frightened of USPS workers uniting with

250,000 UPS workers who recently rejected a Teamsters-backed contract, only to have the union unilaterally impose it.

Last month, APWU officials announced that they were extending the negotiations for another 30 days, forcing workers to remain on the job without a contract. This ensured that any vote on a USPS contract would occur after the October 5 deadline for the release of the UPS contract vote.

The APWU has already made clear that it will oppose any strike action among postal workers. It is promoting the fraud that in the event of a negotiation “impasse,” workers should place their faith in an arbitration contract, imposed unilaterally by federal government authorities. If that were the case, workers would have no opportunity to vote.

The previous contract, which was imposed by the Obama administration’s federal government arbitrators, awarded workers wage increases that never came close to matching the inflation rate. Health care costs were increased for workers by 1 percent each year and a third tier of lower paid workers was added to the workforce. This followed a series of regressive contracts imposed by the APWU.

The fight of postal workers against the three-tier system, low wages, attacks on health care and the threat of privatization by the Trump administration can only be taken forward with the formation of new rank-and-file organizations, independent of the unions. Preparations must be made also for joint industrial strike action with UPS, FedEx and Amazon workers. Such a struggle requires a political counteroffensive of broad sections of the working class against the capitalist profit system and two parties of big business.



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