

As push for privatization ramps up

Hundreds of COVID-19 cases among US Postal Service workers

Kayla Costa
17 April 2020

Thousands of mail carriers, sorters, and clerks who work for the United States Postal Service (USPS) are at risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19 due to the dangerous conditions in which they've been working for the past couple months. On top of the lack of protective gear and sanitary supplies that many workers face, hundreds of USPS workers have reported that management has not informed them of workers in their facilities who tested positive for the virus or even died.

"People are scared because management has stopped communicating," a mail handler at a Long Island processing plant told ProPublica. "We have a right to know from management exactly how many cases are confirmed in the building."

ProPublica obtained reports from workers at 11 facilities thus far who found out of sick coworkers through social media or conversations with coworkers, without any official notification from USPS. There are likely dozens, if not hundreds more cases like them. The latest reported numbers from USPS, from March 30, claim that 207 workers have been diagnosed with the coronavirus.

In New Haven, Connecticut, letter carriers reported that they learned through co-workers that there was at least one confirmed case. Management at a facility in New Orleans failed to track and inform those who had come into contact with a worker who tested positive until five days after the sick worker raised it as a concern.

The discovery of the criminal failure to protect workers on the job has provoked widespread discontent among USPS workers, leading to a number of wildcat sickouts and walkouts. USPS workers are joining Amazon and other workers across and beyond the

logistics industry in a growing wave of strikes and job actions around the world that have erupted largely outside of and in opposition to the trade unions.

Little under two weeks ago, 40 percent of workers at a mail processing facility in North Texas walked out after learning of anywhere from two to 19 cases of COVID-19 at two locations in the small city of Coppell. The following day, four hundred workers called in sick, or roughly 60 percent of the staff.

In Middle Village and Ridgewood, two neighborhoods within New York City, large numbers of workers called out sick in early April after learning through Facebook that several coworkers had tested positive for COVID-19. Normal delivery operations were heavily slowed down due to the sickouts.

These actions and publicized stories of USPS workers have attracted support from large sections of the population that increasingly rely on mail delivery for communications, medications, welfare benefits and other services necessary for daily life under conditions of lockdown. As of this writing, over 640,000 people have signed an online petition demanding hazard pay for all USPS workers. Last Friday, the hashtag #SaveThePostOffice was trending on Twitter, reflecting popular support for safe conditions and full government funding that has so far been denied.

A mail carrier in Northern California told the WSWWS, "I consider myself along with my fellow workers, a necessary constant in the community. Mail volume might be slowly going down, but parcels are through the roof. I am concerned with the government not giving us the extra funding. We deliver many essential items people rely on, like medications every day. Considering we're quasi-federal, and not government

funded,” she said, “it seems like the government should be able to fund such an important essential function.”

While starving the post office of funding, the Trump administration, with the full backing of the congressional Democrats, is making trillions of dollars available to prop up the stock markets, the airlines and other major corporations.

For their part, the four unions at the post office—the American Postal Workers Union, National Association of Letter Carriers, National Postal Mail Handlers Union and National Rural Letter Carriers’ Association—have served to mask over the severity of the situation and keep workers on the job at management’s behest.

Union officials have repeatedly asserted that they are committed to the health and safety of postal workers and are in “constant discussion with USPS” over this. In reality, they have done nothing to seriously address the threat to the health of workers and the public, which would require universal testing and the immediate closure of facilities where workers have showed symptoms or tested positive.

It is 50 years since the 1970 strike when hundreds of thousands of postal workers walked off the job in defiance of the Nixon administration and the union bureaucracy in the largest strike against the federal government in US history. Over the last four decades, the unions have collaborated in the systematic destruction of postal workers’ wages and working conditions, including the establishment of part-time, low-wage positions. This has only encouraged the privatization efforts by successive administrations, with Trump using the pandemic to accelerate the attack on postal workers.

Before the coronavirus, USPS had a negative net worth of \$65 billion and an additional \$140 billion in “unfunded liabilities,” stemming largely from the pensions and retiree health care benefits owed to retired postal workers and their families.

With the reduction of usual mail traffic and additional competition from Amazon, USPS spokesmen have estimated that USPS will run out of money and may be forced to completely shut down by September 30 at the latest.

The recent CARES Act passed by both capitalist parties, and approved by the “socialist” Bernie Sanders, offered USPS a \$10 billion loan, compared to the \$4 trillion freely handed to Wall Street and giant private

corporations. On April 9, USPS requested \$75 billion in emergency funds to help it survive the immediate crisis under the pandemic.

The struggle against privatization and the defense of the basic health and safety needs of postal workers, along with their livelihoods, will not be carried out by the unions, which are tied to the Democratic Party and defend the capitalist system. This fight must be taken up by postal workers and every section of the working class in opposition to the corrupt unions and the two corporate controlled parties.

Rejecting the division and isolation imposed by the four USPS unions, postal workers from all trades should organize rank-and-file workplace committees, independent of the unions, to unify on the common basis with each other and with other key sections of the working class around the world, especially Amazon workers, UPS workers and FedEx workers who carry out the same essential duties for society.

The needs of the working class and humanity must be placed above all considerations of profit and wealth. Rank-and-file committees must demand that all workers be informed of confirmed cases at their facilities, and those facilities must be shut down until workers have been tested and quarantined as needed, and workplace committees, working in conjunction with health care specialists, can ensure that a safe environment exists. Every worker must receive protective gear, sanitation, and permanent pay raises, along with hazard pay and full compensation for any time lost due to COVID-19 related issues.

This must be combined with a fight for socialism, including the transformation of USPS and the major logistics corporations into public entities under the democratic control of the working class, so they can be run on the basis of social need, not private profit.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact