

US Postal Service covers up COVID-19 death toll in New York City

Tom Carter, Shuvu Batta
10 June 2020

A staggering 17,000 workers, or 3 percent of the United States Postal Service workforce, have been quarantined since the start of the pandemic, according to a recent report by *Government Executive* magazine. To date, around 70 percent of those quarantined have been cleared to come back to work.

Management acknowledges that 2,830 workers have tested positive for COVID-19, out of a total workforce of approximately 630,000. However, USPS officials have not made publicly available the number of deaths.

The report by *Government Executive*, published May 21, was able to confirm that 126 federal workers had died to date from the coronavirus pandemic, including 60 USPS workers. However, these figures represent only a “non-comprehensive tally.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with a USPS worker in New York City who was concerned by rumors that there had been a significant number of fatalities at his workplace. He works at the Morgan Processing and Distribution Center, one of the largest mail processing facilities in the country.

Following up on this, the WSWWS contacted the New York City USPS postmaster on Monday to request up-to-date statistics on (1) the number of postal worker deaths in New York City, (2) the number of confirmed cases of the coronavirus among postal workers in the city, and (3) the number of workers in the city who were quarantined. This information was requested to be broken down by facility and borough.

The WSWWS also requested information regarding whether facilities with confirmed cases were closed for deep cleaning and for how long. The US Postal Service is a public enterprise and an agency of the executive branch of the federal government, so the requested information is subject to public disclosure.

The postmaster’s meager reply, transmitted by USPS Communications Specialist Xavier C. Hernandez, consisted in its entirety of the following: “With a workforce of more than 630,000 employees there have been 2,830 postal employees who have tested positive for COVID-19, with some deaths (I don’t have other numbers to provide you, sorry).”

Hernandez added: “Please find all other USPS Covid-19

information here,” adding a link to a press release that was posted on the USPS web page on April 30. This press release, issued almost six weeks ago, did not contain any of the requested statistics, and only pointed to some minimal safety measures that the USPS pledged to adopt more than a month ago, such as face masks.

The WSWWS pressed Hernandez on its original request, and Hernandez responded: “I will reiterate that the number I gave you is the only available information I can provide,” pasting a link to another USPS web page containing generic safety material.

The latter site contains materials of varying dates, such as color posters that can be printed out (one reads “KEEP CALM AND WASH YOUR HANDS”), as well as materials admonishing employees to wear masks, stay six feet away from other people, and to use tissues (“then throw the tissue in the trash and wash your hands”). None of the requested statistics could be located on this web site either.

One of two things is possible. One possibility is that the USPS does not actually track the numbers of deaths, confirmed cases, and self-quarantining postal workers in New York City. If that is true, it would represent colossal and scandalous incompetence on the part of a government agency with a budget of more than \$70 billion, as well as reckless endangerment of hundreds of thousands or even millions of lives. Far more likely is the second possibility, which is that this information is tracked, but is not being disclosed to the public.

There are absolutely no good reasons—and plenty of bad reasons—for keeping this information hidden from the public.

The Trump administration, both political parties, the news media, and their taskmasters in the corporate and financial oligarchy are currently pressing ahead with the homicidal drive to “reopen the economy,” which means sending millions of workers back into workplaces where they face the risk of infection and death. This constitutes an incentive to downplay and suppress the deadly consequences of this reckless policy.

The risks of working during the pandemic are substantial and serious. More than 400,000 people have already lost their lives in the global disaster, and more than 7 million have been infected. While 112,000 have already died in the United States,

according to official statistics—more than any other country—many other victims have suffered debilitating and life-altering health consequences that will continue for years to come.

No worker of sound mind would choose to eat at a restaurant where people had recently died from eating contaminated food, but workers are being told every day to show up to contaminated workplaces where other workers have already fallen ill or have died. In many workplaces, the safety measures that have been trumpeted by management are largely cosmetic, designed to lull workers into a false sense of security, and do not reflect the gravity of the danger.

Management's reckless indifference to the fate of workers is compounded by the complicity of the unions. The four unions at USPS—the American Postal Workers Union, National Association of Letter Carriers, National Postal Mail Handlers Union and National Rural Letter Carriers' Association—have also concealed information from workers in order to prevent them from taking any action that would disrupt production.

Hundreds of USPS workers had already been infected with the virus by mid-April, at which time workers' anger peaked as they began to discover confirmed cases in their communities. USPS workers walked out in Coppell, Texas, while sickouts took place in Middle Village and Ridgewood in New York City, among other spontaneous job actions.

The USPS had a deplorable safety record prior to the pandemic. In February, a lawsuit revealed that nearly 44,000 USPS workers had been fired since 2006 after being injured on the job. The criminally indifferent response to the deadly virus is a continuation and expansion of the generally callous attitude to workers' health and safety that predated the pandemic.

When it comes to information from management, another New York City USPS worker, speaking with the *World Socialist Web Site*, put it bluntly: "They won't give you any."

Workers speak among themselves and gather and exchange what information they can: "There are people that have been gone for weeks, and people who have been gone who never came back," he said. "You find out about it that way. At this point everyone is used to that. You will not get that information from management."

He said management conceals this information because "they knew what the ripple effect would be." Meanwhile, he said, workers feel like "they were being lied to and manipulated." The whole postal system would be in danger of collapse, he said, if there were a full disclosure of the facts.

"There was a situation where one of the workers caught it, and the manager did not tell the workers about it," he said. "The workers found out, and then next day, half of the workers did not show up. I would feel that way too. They need to give you a chance to make your own decision."

"What is more important, my safety or the job at hand? They did not have a clear way to handle the situation. We were pretty much left in the dark," he said. "They waited until the last

possible minute, until it was already at the doorstep," he added.

He said he supports the safety measures that have been put in place in his own workplace, which include disinfecting stations, masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer. However, he understands that not all workplaces have the same level of protection.

With respect to the ongoing mass protests in the city and around the world, he said he was supportive but he was "outraged from before" the protests. Police brutality and police racism existed before the demonstrations, he said, and "the police are always this way." He said that things would not change through the politics of the Democrats and Republicans. In his view, people needed to "stop the flow of money" to the corporations and the rich: "That's the sweet spot. Follow the money."

Describing workers struggling to meet child care needs during the pandemic, drowning in bills, and going hungry, he added, "You are frozen, but the corporations are still sending bills. The bills are not frozen. The bills are still coming in."

"You have these idiots trying to open things up," he said, referring to the corporate drive to reopen the economy. "The idea that you can ease back into it, in the pursuit of money, is ridiculous. You can't just go back to the way things were. All this is ridiculous."

Workers throughout the essential industries, who remain on or are returning to their jobs, have every right to demand that management provide prompt and detailed disclosures of all illnesses and deaths. Vague statements about "some deaths" are totally unacceptable and should not be tolerated.

The WSWS urges USPS workers, together with all similarly situated workers, to immediately form independent workplace safety committees, consisting of rank-and-file workers, to gather and circulate accurate information and enforce the most robust measures to defend workers and prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact