

US Postal Service workers, privatization, and the defense of democratic rights

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Employing over 600,000 workers and handling 48 percent of the world's mail volume, the United States Postal Service (USPS) is the world's largest mail carrier service. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, postal workers join all logistics workers in playing an ever more "essential" role, as they deliver food, medications, checks, communications, and much more to millions of homes.

Further, with the presidential election less than one month away, USPS workers perform the essential task of transporting mail-in ballots, the safest means of voting in the midst of the rampant spread of the coronavirus.

Despite the critical position of this workforce, postal workers have been treated as if their lives have no value. At least 10,000 postal workers have been infected and 83 have died from the coronavirus. These casualties are a direct result of the policies enforced by USPS management and politicians at every level, along with the four postal unions that seek to suppress the opposition of workers and subordinate them to the Democratic Party.

Postal workers must take the initiative to build their own independent rank-and-file workplace committees to coordinate opposition against the Trump administration, his mega-donor turned Postmaster General Louis DeJoy, and the entire financial oligarchy that both parties represent.

By asserting that rights to decent work conditions, universal and affordable mail delivery, and even fair elections must not be subordinated to private profit or the authoritarian plans of Donald Trump, postal workers can win the active support of the working class in the United States and internationally.

The road to privatization

Postmaster DeJoy, a multi-millionaire GOP donor who held a large number of shares in Amazon, XPO Logistics and UPS before taking the top post at USPS, has accelerated efforts to fully privatize the US postal system. The aim of dismantling this public asset is to create an expendable workforce and allow private companies to feast off the profits made from the increased exploitation of the working class.

This is part of a global offensive against the working class. Brazil is in the final stages of privatizing the state-owned postal office Correios, after a nationwide 35-day strike was sabotaged by the postal unions in September. The Australian government is leading a restructuring of Australia Post that threatens 2,000 jobs while workers have been punished for speaking out on COVID-19 conditions. In the UK, the Royal Mail was privatized in 2013, and now the postal workers union is negotiating a contract with Royal Mail, which will result in mass layoffs. The Japanese postal service was fully privatized in 2007. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the German Postal Service was privatized in 1989.

In the United States, the first step towards privatization was undertaken in 1970 with the Nixon-backed postal "reform" proposal aimed at transforming the US Post Office Department into an "independent" Postal Authority while maintaining the ban on strikes for federal employees and proposing a wage increase below the rate of inflation. This sparked an 8-day wildcat strike by 210,000 postal workers in defiance of Nixon who failed to get the mail restarted with National Guardsmen. While strikers won major wage increases and concessions, the unions agreed to accept strike bans and government conditions of collective bargaining that made possible the passage of the Postal Reorganization Act later in 1970.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in 2010, reviewing the lessons of the strike and the consequences of the Postal Reorganization Act, "The Post Office was abolished as a cabinet department and reorganized along the lines of a business corporation, in which public financing would be phased out in favor of self-sufficiency. In the long run, this could only be achieved through postage rate increases, reductions to 'inefficiencies,' and by driving down labor costs."

Since then, all successive administrations and Congresses, whether Democratic or Republican, have progressively accelerated the attack on the USPS and postal workers.

Under the Democratic Clinton administration in the 1990s, the USPS began contracting out services and forming links with private firms like New Breed Logistics, which was formerly headed by DeJoy. Under the Republican Bush administration, Congress passed the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act of 2006, with near-unanimous support by both Democrats and Republicans, including that of Senator Bernie Sanders.

The massive annual budget deficits triggered by the 2006 legislation, which issued the unique demand that USPS pay for workers' full retirement benefits decades in advance, was used by former president Barack Obama to justify a new round of attacks on the public agency. While bailing out major corporations and Wall Street following the Great Recession in 2008, Obama oversaw the closure of over 3,700 post office buildings and the removal of at least 150,000 career employee positions.

These policies were made possible by the postal workers unions, which negotiated contracts that facilitated the steady attacks on postal workers while blocking the mobilization of rank-and-file opposition against them. As a result, over 300,000 full-time positions were slashed or transferred to part-time positions from 1999 to 2019. In that same time span, the annual salary of the lowest-tier postal worker employee fell from \$64,691 (adjusted for inflation) to \$39,218.

To cover up for their betrayals, the unions sought to feign opposition and channel workers' immense anger behind the Democratic Party. The American Postal Workers Union (APWU), the largest postal union in the nation and world, endorsed Obama in 2008 and 2012, Bernie Sanders during the primaries in both 2016 and 2020, only later to back Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden.

DeJoy, Trump, and the defense of democratic rights

Donald Trump has openly endorsed the dismantling of USPS, releasing his own privatization plan in 2018. The Trump administration has utilized the COVID-19 pandemic to starve the USPS of financial resources and appoint his supporters to the Board of Governors with overwhelming bipartisan support in Congress.

Memos leaked this summer revealed DeJoy's plans to consciously slow delivery speed, cut overtime hours, consolidate operations in his hands, and remove thousands of mail sorting units. Through these changes, DeJoy aims to undermine the reliability of the USPS, erode overwhelming public support for the USPS, and implement cost-cutting measures, all of which serve to facilitate an easier selloff to the vultures on Wall Street.

If the ruling class succeeds, privatization would mean the transformation of postal workers into an ever more low-wage, part-time, and expendable workforce. The rights that postal workers once won to decent pay, job security, and benefits would be completely cast aside, allowing private corporations to drive down the conditions of all logistics workers even lower.

It is noteworthy that the nation's first Postmaster General was Benjamin Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of the American Revolution. Even before 1776, Franklin was driven by the democratic ideal of creating a system that would facilitate the circulation of letters, newspapers and other forms of communication within the Colonies and with Europe, thereby strengthening the opposition to the British Crown. Among Franklin's many contributions were surveying roads, having riders carry mail by night as well as day to speed up service and abolishing the practice of letting postmasters decide which newspapers could travel through the mail.

The ability of the population to freely circulate information is seen as an existential threat by the ruling class, which is increasingly resorting to censorship against the dissemination of any ideas it does not deem acceptable. If privatization is accomplished, whatever democratic content is left in the postal service would be eliminated and rights would become privileges, subordinated to the need to accumulate profits by corporate executives and financial investors. Delivery prices would sharply increase, cost-cutting measures would be expanded, and many rural areas of the country would be cut off from accessible mail delivery since low-volume services would not generate adequate profit margins. Mail communications and package delivery would mirror the unequal distribution of universal high-speed internet access and quality infrastructure, starving the poor and working class of information and essential goods.

Perhaps one of the sharpest expressions of this undermining of democratic principles is Trump's efforts to sabotage mail ballots for the presidential election. With the help of DeJoy's wrecking ball operations, Trump has denounced mail-in balloting as "fraudulent" and completely unreliable, even going so far as accusing mail carriers of "selling the ballots." Trump repeatedly states that he will not accept the results of a "rigged election," effectively establishing himself as dictator of America.

While Trump openly appeals to far-right militias to guard polling stations and intimidate voters and postal workers, the Democratic Party seeks to cover up the threat of dictatorship. Biden and Harris are urging voters to "stay calm" and carry on with electoral processes as usual. The Democrats and all their affiliated organizations, including the unions, refuse to warn the working class of the dangers that exist and mobilize popular opposition. This is because the Democrats and the unions fear a popular movement in opposition to Trump could quickly evolve into a revolutionary challenge to the dictatorial rule of the corporate and financial elite, which the Democrats defend, just as much as Trump and the Republicans.

In a world of stark inequality, where three billionaires own more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of the US population, the ruling class is compelled to turn towards authoritarian forms of rule in order to maintain this diseased social order and violently suppress mass working-class opposition.

Build rank-and-file action committees!

Contrary to the claims of the postal unions and pseudo-left organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the defense of democratic rights will not be won by appealing to the Democratic Party, the same organization which has actively sabotaged the USPS and deliberately conceals Trump's coup plans. Even if Biden becomes the occupant of the White House, this will not slow down the assault on the postal service. He will come in, likely with the aid of the US military, and immediately embark on an historic program of fiscal austerity to finance the massive bailout of Wall Street, along with military aggression and a crackdown on political dissent.

Postal workers can and must take action to organize a real struggle against the dual threats of privatization and a Trump dictatorship. Some workers have already begun to disobey management, refusing to dismantle mail sorting units and working overtime to deliver essential items. These brave steps forward must be consciously organized, expanded, and connected to the fight of all postal workers and the broader working class through the formation of rank-and-file workplace committees, independent of the unions and both corporate-controlled parties.

These committees must be democratically controlled by the workers themselves and committed to fight for what workers need, not what the powers-that-be claim is affordable. Workers must advance their own set of demands, such as safe conditions to protect them from COVID-19, wage increases, the transfer of part-time workers to full-time positions, the restoration of the USPS as a public institution with full funding, and direct workers' oversight and control over daily operations.

With their own means of connecting with one another on social media, workers can share critical information about what's taking place in their area and can coordinate independent action. Rank-and-file action committees would serve as the means through which postal workers can mobilize their own strength, appealing to the broader working class to take part in the fight to defend all social and democratic rights, including the preparation of a general strike.

Ultimately, saving the USPS from destruction requires a fight of the working class against the profit-based capitalist system, which compels the ruling class to feast upon public services and destroy democratic rights to continue the enrichment of a handful of people. Rather than remaining in the hands of the Board of Governors and Congress, the USPS must be transformed into a public utility democratically run and controlled by the working class, along with Amazon and other logistics corporations. This necessary task demands a fight for socialism, the creation of genuine democracy and the reorganization of economic life based on human needs instead of private profits.

We urge all workers who agree with this statement to reach out to us.



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