

US Postal Service, starved for funds, approaches gridlock with 14,000 workers quarantined

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Recently updated statistics published by the National Association of Letter Carriers union indicate that more than 14,000 US Postal Service workers are currently in quarantine as a result of exposure to the coronavirus.

The large number of quarantined workers together with the historically unprecedeted demand over the November–December holiday season, compounded by decades of deliberate underfunding and mismanagement, has brought the post office to the brink of being completely overwhelmed.

The beleaguered US Postal Service, which employs more than 600,000 workers and handles almost half of the world's mail volume, has been intentionally starved for resources under both Democratic and Republican administrations in an effort to undermine its operations and pave the way for privatization.

In addition to causing delays of holiday packages, the sabotage of postal operations undermines the delivery of pandemic aid, including the distribution of vaccines.

Postmaster General Louis DeJoy, the former CEO of a private logistics firm and Trump megadonor who was appointed in May, has carried out what amounts to an inside wrecking operation.

Immediately after his appointment, DeJoy launched a major “restructuring” designed to undermine the integrity of the mail voting process, set back wages and working conditions for USPS employees, and pave the way for dismantling of the entire service nationwide. Under DeJoy, cost-cutting measures imposed in July were specifically intended to result in “mail left behind or mail on the workroom floor.”

While they have been under attack from above, USPS workers have played an essential and even heroic role during the coronavirus pandemic, handling

unprecedented volumes of packages as masses of people relied on mail delivery to avoid exposure to the coronavirus.

According to Adobe Analytics research, total e-commerce (buying or selling products over the internet) was anticipated to reach \$189 billion in November and December this year, up by one-third from the previous year.

Now, in the midst of the holiday season, traditionally the busiest time of the year, USPS workers are exhausted, thousands are sick or in quarantine, and packages are piling up. In northern Ohio, shipping volume is up by 70 percent over the previous year, and similar upsurges are reported around the country.

In Cleveland, photos obtained by the local Fox 8 news station showed mountains of backlogged mail. In St. Louis, postal workers were reported to be working 10-to-12-hour days, with workers being given additional assignments outside their usual job responsibilities. Twelve-hour days were also reported in Indianapolis. In Detroit, one worker reported that assignments were being made of two eight-hour routes back-to-back every day.

A worker in Baltimore told the local ABC news station that the downtown station had staffing levels of only around 50 percent, describing the post office as “beyond overwhelmed.”

Yesterday, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that there are packages dating from before Thanksgiving (November 26) still scattered around one USPS facility. “Facilities across the region are so full of packages, there is barely enough room to walk,” the newspaper reported. “In Allentown, about 10 trailers filled with mail are sitting in the parking lot, with no room to

unload the items.”

Many gifts and other packages shipped to family members for the December holidays will not arrive in time. But the delayed packages also include more urgently needed contents, such as medication and medical equipment. The delay of such packages can result not just in discomfort and inconvenience, but also in some cases serious medical consequences and hospitalizations.

USPS management has acknowledged that the service is buckling under the combined weight of the substantial number of quarantined workers and the unprecedented demand. “While every year the postal service carefully plans for peak holiday season, a historic record of holiday volume compounded by a temporary employee shortage due to the COVID-19 surge, and capacity challenges with airlifts and trucking for moving this historic volume of mail are leading to temporary delays,” reads an official statement.

But far from being the product of unforeseen circumstances, the disaster now facing the USPS is the direct result of long-term efforts to cripple and privatize the service—all while trillions of dollars have been allocated to bail out private companies and hundreds of billions have piled up in the coffers of the American oligarchs.

The federal authorities refused to allocate the necessary resources to the postal service even as it became clear in the spring and summer that demand would soar on account of the pandemic. The political establishment fears that a massive allocation of resources would cut across the decades-long drive to undermine the postal service and lay the ground for privatization.

Scrambling to meet the increased demand this year, the logistics infrastructure has witnessed mass hiring of tens of thousands of workers into temporary positions. These are generally physically demanding jobs, poorly paid and dangerous, especially for workers without experience and training in the industry.

A lawsuit earlier this year alleged that there had been 44,000 workers fired at USPS since 2006 after getting injured on the job.

This already-dangerous work continued apace throughout the pandemic, carrying with it the increased risk of exposure to the virus. A *World Socialist Web Site* report earlier this year exposed how USPS

management had been hiding COVID-19 cases from the workforce.

Approximately 23,000 USPS workers have now tested positive for the virus since the start of the pandemic, and currently more than 7,000 have active infections. Many have died. One count in October found that at least 83 USPS workers had died from the virus so far, but in the absence of reliable statistics, this figure likely underestimates the true toll.

The Amazon conglomerate, where at least 20,000 workers contracted the virus in the US, has hired as many as 400,000 workers worldwide. UPS hired 100,000 temporary and 39,000 career employees between April and June. FedEx hired 70,000 temporary workers.

The USPS has hired 50,000 temporary workers, but this figure does little to offset the impact of a decades-long jobs massacre. In 1997, there were 765,000 career and 128,000 temporary USPS workers, dropping to 497,000 career and 136,000 temporary workers in 2019. As part of this process, which continued under both Democratic and Republican administrations, the replacement of thousands of career workers with temporary employees has meant fewer benefits and lower salaries.

The man-made disaster confronting the USPS now threatens to compound the challenge of distributing pandemic relief aid. “The more than 30,000 postal retail facilities could assist in vaccine distribution and other relief functions,” an editorial observed in the *Columbia Daily Tribune*. But with the USPS approaching gridlock, the ability to use that infrastructure to distribute life-saving aid has been critically undermined.



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