

US postal workers' union proposes tentative agreement with cuts to real wages, keeps two-tier system

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On December 11, the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) announced a three-year tentative agreement reached with the United States Postal Service (USPS). The last 2018-2021 agreement expired September 20. The APWU leadership at national and regional levels unanimously endorsed the agreement, aiming to push it through a membership vote as soon as possible.

More than 200,000 postal employees and retirees are in the APWU, across over 100 different positions within the clerk, maintenance, and support services divisions. These workers carry out essential duties in retail stores, call centers, offices, mail processing warehouses and vehicle depots for post offices across the country. The APWU is the largest of the four postal worker unions in the United States.

Postal workers have seen their real wages, benefits, job security and work conditions deteriorate over the past two decades, with major concessions included in each successive contract. A two-tier system was established in 2011, creating a section of Postal Support Employees (PSE) who are paid significantly less and do not receive a number of benefits. Thousands of post offices and warehouses have shuttered, while workers have been forced to take on greater volumes of work at risk to their health and safety.

While APWU President Mark Dimondstein claimed that the deal, “protects the rights and interests of our members,” the latest union deal leaves intact every concession of the past, while adding a few new ones.

First, wage increases are a measly 1.3 percent per year, 5 percent less than the current inflation rate of 6.8 percent. While first-tier “career” employees will receive

contractual COLA increases, the actual amount that each worker receives varies wildly and for many is well below the actual rate of inflation. The lowest-paid career worker (\$31,243 annually) saw a COLA increase of 7.5 percent in 2021, while the highest-paid career worker (\$72,381 annually) received a 3.2 percent increase.

Second, the contract proposal drives down labor costs by expanding the number of lower-tier PSEs and keeping their wages and benefits abysmally low, attempting to pit new and long-term workers against each other. PSEs do not receive COLA increases, something which is maintained by the latest agreement. Instead, they would get an additional 1 percent annual wage increase for a total of 2.3 percent each year, still far below inflation.

PSEs are already the lowest-paid workers in the Postal Service, making \$17.62 to \$20.21 per hour for up to two years before being converted to first-tier career employees. They complete the same job duties and tasks, but they are paid significantly less, receive lower pay raises, and have higher out-of-pocket healthcare expenses.

PSEs are often the first to be forced to work overtime since their pay is lower, and it is common for PSEs to work more than 50 or 60 hours per week, especially during the holiday “peak” season. While the new contract extends “no layoff protections” to approximately 72,000 current career employees who have worked for USPS less than six years, PSEs are not included in those protections and can be fired before reaching career status.

According to the union's summary of the deal, it allows for an increase of the fraction of PSEs in the total workforce from the current 20 percent cap by up to 4 percent in the first four weeks leading up to the holiday season.

The deal also includes significant loopholes which allow management to circumvent the cap. For example,

according to the summary, “the 12 PSEs per District assigned to Level 4 RMPOs [Remotely Managed Post Offices with part-time window service hours] will no longer count against the 20% District cap”, and, “10 PSEs in the 46 Package Support Annexes (PSAs) will not count against the District cap (for a total maximum of 460 PSEs) and will be allowed to work in any facility in the installation the PSA is attached to.”

Significantly, as with virtually all union contracts negotiated over the past two years, the APWU's tentative agreement makes no mention of measures to protect workers from the threat of COVID-19, even though the contract was hammered out in the early stages of a major winter surge, and with the hyper-infectious Omicron variant spreading rapidly. The APWU, as with the unions in general, has enforced the dangerous work conditions that have caused the spread of the virus throughout the workforce.

The contract is another stage in the decades-long attack on the Post Office, which the ruling class has sought to progressively dismantle since 1971, when the USPS was created as an independent agency increasingly reliant upon its revenues rather than taxpayer funding. Previously, the Post Office was administered as a cabinet level agency within the federal government. That move followed the massive strike by hundreds of thousands of postal workers in 1970, the largest wildcat strike in American history to date.

This campaign reached new heights last year with with the appointment of current Postmaster General, Louis DeJoy, a multimillionaire Trump megadonor whose companies have tens of millions of dollars worth of contracts with USPS, last year. Here, longstanding attacks on the functioning of USPS dovetailed with Trump's plans to overturn the November presidential election, using as his pretext false claims of voter fraud facilitated through mail-in balloting. DeJoy began ordering a series of measures which were obviously aimed at bolstering claims, such as halting patrols by postal police and security and suddenly removing more than 700 mail sorting machines nationwide.

However, DeJoy was kept on as Postmaster General under Biden, an indication that the attack on the post office has broad bipartisan support. In addition to DeJoy himself, the USPS Board of Governors consisting of private investors and corporate executives has ties to both parties, who are aiming to to discredit the public service while cutting costs in order to prepare the groundwork for privatization.

The 2021-2024 tentative agreement aligns with the increased productivity and revenue demands of USPS, which has been on track for privatization for years. A favorable article in the *Government Executive* reported that the USPS deputy postmaster general and chief human resources officer, Doug Tulino, considers the agreement in line with Postmaster General Louis DeJoy's latest 10-year “Delivering for America” plan, which took effect on October 1. The plan will lengthen maximum delivery time for first-class mail, eliminate US Air Mail, reduce operating hours and workers' hours, and raise consumer prices.

The APWU, meanwhile, has become a big business unto itself after decades of forcing through one concession after another. Across both the local and national levels, the union reported over \$248 million in assets this year to the Department of Labor, and Dimondstein made \$182,000 from his position as president last year.

Postal workers must organize a fight against this sellout contract and reject it by the widest possible margin. They must join the growing movement of workers against decades of declining wages and layoffs, which increasingly taking the form of a rebellion against both management and the pro-corporate unions, as demonstrated in strikes earlier this year at Volvo Trucks, John Deere and now at Kellogg's, where workers overwhelmingly rejected a sellout contract in favor of continuing their two-month-long strike.

But to carry this fight forward requires that they build their own organizations to direct and plan this struggle. This means the formation of rank-and-file committees independent of the union, as workers across the country have formed this year.



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