

“The raises are insulting in this economy”: Postal workers oppose union-brokered tentative agreement

Erik Schreiber
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Postal workers are responding with anger to the three-year tentative agreement that the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) reached with the United States Postal Service (USPS) on December 11. On Thursday, the APWU held informational meetings about the agreement to stifle the opposition that it is already provoking.

The agreement continues the attacks on pay and working conditions that postal workers have faced for decades—attacks the APWU has helped enforce. At a time when the inflation rate has reached 6.8 percent, the contract provides annual raises of only 1.3 percent. These raises constitute a cut to real pay, and the cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) will be inadequate to help many workers keep pace with inflation.

“The 1.3 percent raises are insulting in this current economy,” one maintenance worker with 20 years’ seniority told the *World Socialist Web Site*, adding that he and his coworkers have stayed on the job nonstop throughout the pandemic. “They continue to do very little for us,” he said. “Our jobs are being taken away constantly.” He pointed to the Custodial Team Cleaning concept, which he said had cost a lot of jobs.

“I wonder why custodians weren’t boosted up another pay level like everyone else,” said one worker on Facebook. “Doesn’t make any sense to me. Disheartening ... anyone know why we were left out last year and this year? We deserve it as much as anyone else does!”

Another worker linked the insulting raises directly to the APWU. “I’ve seen 15 to 20 percent increases in pay the past year from other companies. Why are we paying dues?”

“I’m voting no,” said one worker on Reddit. “The

COLAs are not big enough: we are getting a pay cut with inflation at 6.8 percent.”

Other workers on Reddit echoed these sentiments. “I’m voting no, too,” one said. “Excluding the benefits to postal support employees [PSEs], which I support, I’m really disappointed with this offer. In my area, starting wages really aren’t living wages.”

PSEs are a lower paid second tier of the post office workforce who are paid significantly less than first tier “career” employees, and the contract contains loopholes allowing USPS to circumvent caps on the PSE fraction of the workforce. As in the previous contract, PSEs would not receive any COLA under the tentative agreement.

Dennis, a clerk, told the *World Socialist Web Site* about the steady expansion of lower-paid PSEs within the postal workforce. “PSEs originally were fill-in workers,” he said. “They weren’t intended to be full-time help. If the union saw PSEs working 40 hours, we used to argue it was a job for a regular union employee. Somehow, we lost that.”

“When I was a PSE, the union employees would get paid if I worked over 40 hours a week,” Dennis added. “Now we work them up to 72 hours a week with zero penalties.”

The two-tier system pits workers against each other and must be jettisoned immediately, Maxwell Olsen told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Now is the time to demand more, and [the tentative agreement] looks like more of the same, small incremental wins, while still lagging behind where we were pre-two-tier.”

Postal workers should have the right to strike, Olsen said—which they have been long denied by federal legislation. “As long as they know they can shove this

BS down our throat under the threat of ‘Well, the arbitration could be even worse,’ it’s going to keep happening, contract after contract, to every craft.”

A worker on Facebook pointed out that the tentative agreement provides no help to employees who want to move to rejoin their families. “We asked our union rep to please, please advocate for changes to career transfers,” she said. “They didn’t have anything to say.” Several other workers raised this issue as well.

Dennis described how the control of USPS has been centralized over time to exert maximum pressure on workers. “USPS is run from a spreadsheet. Local control keeps disappearing,” he said. Just as in any other industry (and most notoriously at Amazon), management monitors workers’ productivity with unremitting vigilance. “District managers use numbers as hammers, as anything less than perfect seems to be failing.”

Most significantly, the tentative agreement makes no mention whatsoever of the ongoing pandemic. Even though the APWU and USPS developed the agreement during the beginning of the current winter surge, it contains no measures to protect workers against the coronavirus. For almost two years, the APWU has enforced conditions that have led to infections and deaths among its own members. The emergence of the Omicron variant, which is much more infectious than previous variants, will make conditions for postal workers still more dangerous.

Postal workers well understand the concessionary nature of the proposed agreement. Not only must they reject it, they also must break from the treacherous APWU and form an independent rank-and-file committee, as workers in other industries have done. Only in this way can postal workers win back the concessions that the union has made and secure a truly human standard of living.



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