USPS rural letter carrier whose wages were cut by $20,000 speaks out on slashed pay, harsh working conditions

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Work at USPS? Tell us what you working conditions are like by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

The WSWS recently spoke with a rural letter carrier for the United States Postal Service about working conditions following the implementation of the new Rural Routes Evaluated Compensation System (RRECS) method of calculating wages. Since its deployment roughly two-thirds of rural letter carriers have reported steep cuts in pay.

The RRECS system is an arbitrary evaluation system based on how long a route is determined to take. Workers are expected to scan every item for tracking and delivery, and they are given a specific amount of time for each type of parcel to deliver it. If workers fall behind on the allotted schedule, they will see their pay reduced.

The worker, who spoke to the WSWS on the condition of anonymity for fear of retribution, said she lost $20,000 a year in pay after the new compensation system went into effect.

"I'm a single mom of two kids," she said, "and that's the only reason I stayed at the post office is because I knew I could get paid well and be able to take care of them. And now I honestly don't know what I'm going to do if they don't correct it and go back to our old pay system. I'm definitely leaving the post office. I've already made that decision. I'm basically giving it until November before Christmas season starts, because I refuse to do Christmas at lower pay because Christmas is so stressful. And I've lost out on so much every Christmas with my kids because, like I said, they expect you to just not have a life and make them your priority.

"At this point I'm also trying to pick up side jobs just to pay bills because I'm losing $2,000 a month. Like, I don't see how that doesn't drastically affect anyone. My rent is $1,300 a month alone. I'm only making $1,500 as opposed to the $2,500 every two weeks I was making. And daycare is also not cheap, you know?

"It's just ridiculous. I just don't know how they literally expect people to be able to do this. And you think 'Post Office, that's a good job. That's a respectable job.' And then it's just a slap in the face. At this point I can't afford to even get sick.

"If the pay is not there, it's just not worth it. One of my coworkers told me that she got bumped up to working six days a week rather than five, so she only gets Sundays off, and every other week she gets I think a Saturday off. So she worked six days a week, every other week, and her pay dropped down to $1,100 every two weeks. And she's a single mom, too, and now she can't afford her rent. And she's like, well, if you go get a job at Target or Walmart, they pay better than the Post Office now. I just think that's pretty sad when you're getting compared to working at Target and could make more money to go do retail."

On how wages are being calculated under the RRECS, she said, "They're not counting anything except what we scan and how far we walk to deliver packages [in the evaluation]. I was overburdened before Christmas. And a lot of the subs that run my route have a really hard time getting it done in the evaluation time because it's overburdened. Well, since RRECS got implemented, my route is not considered overburdened anymore and I currently have another neighborhood being built and I have to start delivering to them, but I'm still being paid as if I weren't overburdened."

When attempting to speak with union representatives about these issues she was simply told that she would be better off working somewhere else.

"It made me mad because I feel like I've put in so much time and I've lost so much time with my kids for them to do this. And I just feel even worse for all the people that I work with who have been there for years and have retirement literally around the corner."

On top of the drastic pay cuts, rural letter carriers are expected to work long hours and often without days off for prolonged periods of time.

"When I first got hired, they told me I was getting hired to work one day a week. And then after I got trained and started, they just made me work everyday. Even if you had a day off, they could call you in. They had until 11 a.m. to call you and say, 'oh, you need to come to work.' And so I would go. I actually went 15 days straight working without a day off because I got hired so close to Christmas.

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"You weren't allowed to say no. Supervisors had a rule that you only had three 'no's.' You had to use them lightly."

These conditions are very common among "subs." These workers are hired to fill the route of a full-time carrier should they be unavailable, but the chronic short-staffing of post offices often requires subs to work long days and weeks. According to this worker, subs often work 50–60 hours a week and because the routes they are filling are overburdened they are typically only paid for the evaluated time, not for any overtime that they might work.

Pay is also affected by the type of delivery. She noted that letter carriers can scan multiple packages for delivery to the same location, but the post office reduced the number of packages that could be scanned at once and reduced the payment for workers if they did so.

"We found out that when you were scanning multiple packages like that, you were only getting like 1/3 of a credit per package that you scanned. Whereas if you scan each package by itself, you get paid the full credit for that package because it's being scanned by itself."

The scanner system, replicating the package tracking of UPS, FedEx and Amazon, places an added burden onto workers, taking up to "three out of the seven hours" in a day just for workers to input data into their scanning devices, which this worker reports little to no training was provided on.

And as routes continue to grow and the evaluated time decreases, workers are finding it increasingly more difficult to keep up with the amount of work they are being given, especially due to the vast influx of Amazon packages through the postal service.

"I deliver more Amazon than I do people's personal packages to each other," she said.

"With Amazon, you could have anywhere from one to two GPCs [general purpose containers] and a full hamper of packages including Amazon. Without Amazon, I would probably have maybe half a hamper, if that, I'll say a quarter of a hamper, honestly."

The rapid influx of Amazon packages has effectively turned rural carriers into little more than Amazon delivery drivers. Describing just how dominating Amazon has become, she said, "We have Amazon Sundays at the post office. On those they'll actually give the regulars the option to go in on Sunday and deliver packages.

"But what's kind of ridiculous is they won't let us deliver anything that's going through the Post Office. So if it's not an Amazon package, you're not allowed to deliver that on Sunday, but you can deliver all the Amazon packages, but you have to take whatever they give you, you can't just deliver like for your route. That's how high and priority Amazon is that we will have people spending their Sundays delivering Amazon packages and nothing else."

This predominance of Amazon packages is causing a safety concern as well. "My coworkers and I have joked that [Amazon] gives us all the heavy packages and they take the smaller ones, because I deliver packages that are the size of myself and definitely heavy.

"There will be a bright yellow sticker [on the package] that says team lift. We don't have team lifts when we're out there delivering our route, and we're expected to make it happen. I've actually gotten in trouble for refusing to deliver giant packages because I'm not going to hurt myself to get that."

She added that if workers attempt to refuse to deliver unsafe packages they are threatened with "delaying the mail," which is technically a federal crime, by management, a clear attempt to intimidate workers.

"When there's bad weather, we're still expected to go in," she added. "We're still expected to at least attempt to deliver all our packages, like they've actually delayed the mail but made sure Amazon [packages] get delivered."

USPS delivers 30 percent of Amazon's packages nationwide and those deliveries account for roughly 10 percent of USPS' total annual revenue. USPS subsidizes Amazon by providing low rates for package deliveries, saving the retail giant billions of dollars by servicing remote and cost-ineffective regions. The USPS is desperate for the revenue that Amazon provides as it struggles financially without federal funding, giving Amazon considerable influence over USPS policy.

"I don't know, it just looks that people don't care about their employees. They care about making money and delivering Amazon."

She added that management is disrespectful of workers, referring to them as "bodies" and demanding that they complete more work with less people.

"That's why they don't care that they're just taking all this money away from all these people. Because if they weed everybody out like me, like I'm not close enough to retirement to really want to stay. But I have been there long enough to not really want to uproot my entire life and change. But with all the new people that they can get in and get to stay, I mean, they don't know how much we used to get paid. Not knowing what they could have been making had everybody stood up and did something about it. So basically force everybody who won't stand for it out and then the new people will just come in and they'll deal with it."

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