

Rural mail carrier speaks on Post Office cuts, deteriorating conditions in West Virginia

Naomi Spencer
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Attend the online public meeting “The way forward against the sellout Teamsters contract at UPS,” hosted by the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee, this Saturday, July 29, at 7:00 p.m. Eastern Time. Register for the event [here](#).

Some 50,000 rural carriers for the United States Postal Service are facing layoffs and thousands more confront wage cuts of up to \$20,000 under a new compensation scheme. Local post offices around the country are targeted for closure as USPS is dismantled as a public service. The effective privatization of the USPS and its subordination to Amazon and other private, for-profit capitalist entities has led to a ratcheting up of the exploitation of postal workers.

Kay, a Rural Carrier Associate (RCA) in West Virginia, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the turmoil these cuts have inflicted on her local post office. Her name has been changed to protect her from retaliation.

“I have six working days left,” Kay said. “I put in my notice. I’m just so done. I put in ten years waiting for a position as a career employee and I’ve been done dirty, lied to, manipulated all these years, and all our hours were cut even more.” Kay, like all RCAs, is considered a part-time, non-career employee.

While she waited for a career position, a new compensation formula has been implemented attacking wages, retirement, and health benefits that the part-time and non-career employees have sought. “A coworker who is a career employee with thirty years of service got cut ten hours of pay and made to work Saturday,” Kay noted. “She’s only off Sundays. She has literally worked every Saturday for free because the time she is evaluated for is up, come Friday. She uses her own vehicle to tear up every day.”

Rural carriers pay out of pocket for uniform shirts and leather shoes that are required for the job and are frequently checked for wear, and even USPS-identifying magnets for the outsides of personal cars. “We got one LED light in our office to share but it went out and they would only send one of the old orange flashing bulbs that is barely visible.”

“They just use rural carriers to get the last mile for Amazon,” she stated. “I’m done. I’m sure many more are to follow. They have figured out how to pick us off one by one.

“It’s in our [National Rural Letter Carriers Association] contract that we won’t strike. So, I don’t know what power we

have anymore. We’re never going to get paid what we deserve,” Kay stated. “I’ve been paying dues since I started. I tried to get out of the union and they had me calling near my start date, then calling again in December. It’s a rigamarole just to get out of it.

At their West Virginia office, Kay described understaffed and dangerously dilapidated conditions. The official USPS vehicles are falling apart. “The LLVs [long-life vehicles, government mail trucks] will spontaneously catch on fire. I have a newer Mercedes-Benz Metris van for deliveries. They got all these vans but they didn’t hire any extra mechanics to handle the maintenance. I had mine two years before it even got an oil change, and that was only because my manager drove it 45 minutes to get it serviced.

The nickel-and-diming of vehicle maintenance has made the Post Office ever more dependent on rural carriers using their personal vehicles.

Mountainous rural routes are treacherous even with a reliable vehicle. “State of Emergency means nothing to us,” Kay told the WSWS. “Many times, it’s been so bad I could barely walk but I’ve had to go in and pray a snowplow would go through before I headed out on the route. When roads flood we must find the quickest way to get back on track because we get paid no extra time when conditions are impassable.”

Washouts, sections without shoulders, poor weather, and potholes also pose regular hazards to rural carriers—especially when they use their own cars, because they must sit on the passenger side of their vehicles to reach mailboxes. “There’s no bench seats anymore,” Kay pointed out. We’re not required to wear seatbelts, but I do it anyway. It’s very uncomfortable, but you have to stretch the belt all the way across you so if you’re rear-ended you don’t die. It’s best not to look in your rearview, because if you do, you’ll tense up. That’s what they say. If you’re tense it’ll do more damage.”

“West Virginia rural routes are not like city routes,” Kay explained. “The route I’m on is an old gravel road that doesn’t get much upkeep, and [a busy state highway] which is horrible. We have to use our own vehicles for that. The other carrier just bought a new vehicle and it’s totally devastated the suspension. She had a smaller vehicle to save money on gas, but you couldn’t get ten flat tires on those smaller rims. She had to

trade it in for a bigger vehicle. We were getting flats every week.”

Kay has gotten reprimanded for trying to maintain the USPS vehicles. “One day I had a low tire and ended up running the route while the rim was bent, so it kept losing air, losing air, and I’d go get air and end up paying for it sometimes. My postmaster went on Amazon and got one of those tire pumps you can plug into your cigarette lighter. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve put air into these vehicles, to save time and so it wouldn’t bend the rim or end up getting towed.

“It’s my fault for helping,” she stated. “It’s my personality to help, I’m going to make it easy, efficient, and get it done. That was how I was taught.

“When the tire pressure’s low, the van beeps continually, so one day I used eight minutes of green card time to fill up the tire.” Green card time is an hourly pay calculation outside of the route time pay formula in place. Kay told the WSWS that the regional officer over the local postmasters said, “No, that is not green card time, that is the carrier’s responsibility just like pumping gas.”

“It’s longstanding policy that you don’t cross crafts,” Kay explained. “Carriers are not permitted to perform maintenance on the vehicle. There aren’t even jacks in the vehicle to change a tire. That’s the mechanics’ job. Number one, it’s a safety issue. Number two, it’s us doing their job.

“But if I didn’t do it, I was going to sit there and wait and have to get towed, more than likely by an outside company. It delays the customer’s mail, and it bends the rims and causes more problems and costs more money.”

Rural deliveries require special knowledge and skill. “There are dogs. You have to know the area,” Kay said. “You get to know these people, and you feel obligated if you care. I’m a public servant in my eyes—but we’re not public servants in the eyes of the Postal Service. With the RRECS [Rural Route Evaluated Compensation System], we were told all that matters is six scans: clock in, clock out, clock in for lunch, return from lunch, return to post office, leave post office.”

Yet, beyond the clocking scans, carriers were being evaluated on virtually every movement they made throughout their work days. Kay described Amazon-like, automatized and surveilled routes. “On the scanners it will show when you clock in, how long it takes you to load the packages into the vehicle. It will start when you leave the post office. There’s a scan for unscanned parcels, or if we need to do a stamp cell [when a customer leaves money in a mailbox because they don’t have a stamp], a scan for how many trips to a door we did, authorized discounts for when we have to take handicapped customers’ mail to the door. There’s a whole list; it’s infuriating because the scans are taking even more time.”

The job of sorting and delivering along rural routes is complex. Packages may be oversized and need to be brought to the door. They also arrive at the office in a tub and it takes time for carriers to sort and organize their deliveries into totes. At

each stop, Kay must deliver regular box-sorted letters, “flat” mail such as magazines, and then check the totes for additional packages.

“The only offices around here that were not cut were the ones that took on Amazon Sunday deliveries. There has been a drastic uptick in packages, especially since the pandemic, because it’s convenient. The Postal Service says the mail’s gone down. The mails about the same, to be honest. It may have gone down a couple percent from what I see in our office, but Amazon’s gone up so much and those deliveries take a lot more time than putting mail in a mail box.”

“The RRECS was agreed to [by the union] because the Postal Service said the rural carriers were out there lollygagging, hanging out with people and not actually doing any work,” Kay said. “The new scanners we have to carry with us, they tell you, ‘Oh, you stopped too fast. Why were you stationary for ten minutes?’ And I literally have to say, ‘I was on lunch.’”

“The new evaluations came out based on these scans, and we were cut.”

The tracking and timing of logistics workers is being implemented throughout the industry. UPS and Amazon workers are likewise treated as little more than part of the machinery, with their movements choreographed and steps counted.

“The Post Office wants you to go faster, stop doing stamp cells for customers. Not a word or warning to subs or short timers who just fly through the route and do no additional scans so they can get done sooner because they know it doesn’t affect them. You won’t get penalized for flying down back roads, but what happens if you wreck or you hit a child?”

The creation of intolerable conditions, leading to operational dysfunction, is deliberate, since it helps advocates of privatization make their case.

Kay noted, “They have found a way to chip us out. I had no intention of ever leaving the Post Office. I enjoyed it, I was proud to do it, I was good at it. But they figured out a way to make conditions impossible for the good ones.”



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