

“It is beyond toxic. The morale is so low”: Texas rural letter carrier speaks out on terrible working conditions, massive pay cuts

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Build a Rank-and-File Committee to stop the attack on the post office! Fill out the form at the bottom of this article to learn more. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

A massive assault on the United States Postal Service is currently underway. Under a new restructuring program, post office management is taking aim at tens of thousands of jobs, and slashing wages for tens of thousands of rural carriers, reducing them to poverty. With a new “evaluation period” beginning last week for tens of thousands of rural letter carriers, which is used to determine their pay for the next six months, even deeper cuts to their pay are on the horizon.

Hundreds of rural carriers have written into the *World Socialist Web Site* to share their experiences. Sandy, a rural carrier for the U.S. Postal Service (her name has been changed in this story to protect her from retaliation), is one of them. Sandy delivers mail in West Texas, a center of oil and gas production. Because of the boom-and-bust nature of the industry, the local population rises and falls dramatically with oil prices, as workers come and go for work, drilling new wells.

Like most carriers, Sandy was first hired as a rural carrier associate (RCA), or temporary worker without benefits. RCAs can remain temporary workers for years, are assigned the worst routes, forced to work every day to keep their jobs and receive no guarantees as to when they might qualify to apply for a career, or full-time, position.

“I was working seven days a week as an RCA when I first started,” Sandy recalls. “I had worked 21 days straight. I had to ask [my supervisor], can I please have a day off so I can do laundry? That’s how bad it was.”

She also worked in the 100-degree (38 degrees Celsius) Texas heat in a 35-year-old vehicle with no air conditioning. Days were grueling—she could be sorting her mail at the post office by 5:00 A.M. and still finishing her route by 8:30 P.M.

After several years, she secured a full-time carrier position and was able to “bid” for routes, a first come, first served process of claiming favorable mail routes, based on seniority.

As the newest full-timer, she had the least seniority. She was assigned a “43,” the lowest-paid route. But she was astonished to discover, “Every time they posted them, they put [the route down] as a 43. Well, none of those routes was really a 43. Not one single route.”

The routes were significantly undercounted and undervalued. Since the USPS failed to perform its annual route evaluation, she said, “It took them two years for them to update my route. So I lost two years that I should have been paid at 48,” the highest-paid designation. She estimates she lost tens of thousands of dollars in that period and filed a grievance that has yet to be heard.

Sandy was habitually underpaid, timesheets entered incorrectly by a supervisor, no reimbursement for fuel costs, and so on. One time she worked a holiday, which should have paid double-time-and-a-half, and instead was marked as taking time off and paid out of vacation days. She even received an insulting \$0 paystub multiple times, which can take months to correct. She filed repeated grievances, yet most of these claims were never resolved.

Sandy also suffered multiple significant injuries on the job. Neither injury was properly treated, nor was Sandy properly compensated under workers’ compensation for injuries. The labyrinth of forms, approvals and reimbursement requests is complex, and no one advised her how to navigate the system. No physician where she lived accepted USPS workers’ comp cases “because USPS never paid their bills.”

During COVID, the post office was a center for mass infection, even though there were official guidelines to protect federal workers. “If you were feeling sick, they would tell you, go test and come back to work and wait for your results,” she recalled, adding, “One of our clerks... went to get tested and went from there straight to a ventilator.”

When workers tested positive and were finally allowed to quarantine at home, some did not receive federally-approved COVID leave pay. Instead they were marked as no-shows, not paid at all or harassed by management to return to work.

A jobs and wages bloodbath

The Federal government, under successive Republican and Democratic administrations, has underfunded the Postal Service for decades. It has been subjected instead to constant cuts, designed ultimately to pave the way for its privatization. USPS has eliminated over 250,000 jobs since 2000 through endless cost-

cutting schemes, shrinking its workforce to around 500,000.

In 2022, Congress passed the Postal Service Reform Act, with broad bipartisan support, to end the requirement of pre-funding of retiree healthcare benefits, forcing all future postal workers to enroll in Medicare. Postmaster General Louis DeJoy, a Trump supporter who also has bipartisan support, has also unveiled a 10 year restructuring program called “Delivering for America” which would cut \$200 billion.

The aim is to make the USPS “competitive” with new rivals such as Amazon, notorious for its speedup and exploitation of its workforce, by cutting jobs and consolidating the Postal Service’s operations. DeJoy recently told the right-wing American Enterprise Institute, “Right now, to get to break even, I think we may need to get 50,000 people out of the organization.”

This is mainly to be accomplished through attrition, including 200,000 who are expected to retire over the next two years. But workers are being forced out by intolerable conditions. An internal audit by the USPS Office of Inspector General found that turnover for rural carriers in 2022 was 58.9 percent, up from 38.5 percent in 2019. The reasons most cited for quitting were the grueling hours and lack of respect from supervisors.

In May of this year, the latest version of a pay-for-performance compensation system, negotiated between the National Rural Letter Carriers Association (NRLCA) union and DeJoy, was imposed on workers.

Called the Rural Route Evaluation Compensation System (RRECS), it was rolled out, as intended, with disastrous consequences for rural carriers. Within weeks 6 U.S. Senators wrote to DeJoy that 66 percent of rural carriers saw significant salary decreases and insisted that implementation of the RRECS be halted.

Sandy was among those whose wages plummeted, estimating that she lost over \$10,000 in annual wages since the system started.

The RRECS is a new version of what is effectively a piece-rate system, where workers’ pay is determined by an estimation of their typical volume of deliveries.

Prior to the launch of RRECS there was a 52-week evaluation period in which their routes were assessed and benchmarked. This was done in a flawed and arbitrary way, leading to systematic underestimates of routes and absurd assumptions. As Sandy noted, “The engineers who designed [the RRECS] never ran routes... They’re giving us credit for 3 minutes to fuel up. OK, it takes me longer than that just to go inside and get the receipt because I’ve got to wait in line competing with everyone else going to work.”

As Sandy explained, workers were given no training of this complex and opaque system. “In order to have some kind of idea of what to do, [there’s a] 161-page training manual, and it’s not done in a classroom setting. It’s not even provided to you by USPS, your employer. You have to... log on to the union website,” she said. Carriers had to train themselves on their own time.

Carriers are responsible for manually auditing and correcting their own delivery maps. In an email ominously titled, “ATTENTION RURAL CARRIERS: Mapping is the MOST important thing you can do to ensure you are properly Compensated!” the NRLCA highlights the byzantine process

carriers must complete with their managers:

Rural Carriers: Do you have growth on your route? Have you done your updates to your edit book? Are you making sure the managers are complying with the AMS Edit Book Maintenance SWI? (posted on the RRECS Training tab) Are you requiring your managers to, in your presence, log into Delivery Point Manager (DPM), click 'Download,' plot missing deliveries, view/clear issues, and submit? After allowing 10- 15 minutes for DPM processing, is your supervisor/designee logging into Line of Travel Manager (LTM) in your presence, selecting 'Partial Review,' verifying/plotting Traffic Control Points (TCPS), then submitting and certifying each month? Then once DPM and LTM are finalized, your supervisor/designee MUST initial the DPM and LTM portions of the AMS Edit Book Activity Log. Is that all happening??

Later in the email, the NRLCA reports with alarm that “in the Southern Area only 51% of the time were the DMP and LTM downloaded and corrected.” That is, half of carriers did not even attempt this process, let alone submit it or pursue management until corrections were recorded.

Even more savage cuts through the RRECS are likely underway. This week began an additional two-week “survey,” or evaluation period, to calibrate routes for the next six months. Workers report that their scanners are malfunctioning, and that their mail volumes have been a fraction of their typical daily loads.

It would be exceptional to have such a light load once in a month, Sandy said, but unheard of for four days in a row. This under-counting will ensure that USPS will systematically underpay workers even more.

In addition, the NRLCA announced that over 45,000 rural carriers had “an egregious payroll error this pay period.” Fearing a mutiny, USPS agreed to provide a “salary advance” via money orders.

Asked about the union’s role in protecting her against years of violations, Sandy exclaimed, “The union’s worse than useless!” She continued, “We have no representative, the union steward is an hour away. He only does union business on Thursdays. We never see him.”

The way forward for postal workers is to follow the lead set by workers at UPS and elsewhere: organize rank-and-file committees to organize a fight against not only management but against the corrupt union bureaucracy. When asked if she was interested in a rank-and-file committee, Sandy responded: “Count me in!”



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