

US Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee holds second national meeting

Our reporter
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On Sunday, September 17, US Postal Service workers from across the United States met for nearly two hours in the second meeting of the US Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The wide-ranging discussion dealt with the terrible conditions at the post office as well as critical questions of strategy and perspective.

In an opening report, WSWs writer Omri Wolfe explained how the “Delivering for America” restructuring program means the massive expansion of electronic surveillance, systematic underpayment of work, managerial abuse and pervasive contract violations with the full complicity of the trade union bureaucracy. The purpose of this is to force tens of thousands out of the post office entirely, with DeJoy publicly citing 50,000 fewer jobs as a minimum target over the next few years.

The major postal unions are accomplices at every stage, Wolfe explained, “negotiating” away one concession after the other while refusing to enforce those protections which do exist. Workers are fed up with the unions’ prescription to “smile and file”—that is, to accept intolerable abuse and “work within the system” by filing grievances which ultimately go nowhere. Instead, workers must take matters into their own hands and unite around the country to fight against both the Post Office and the corrupt trade union bureaucracy, as well as the Democratic and Republican parties which support DeJoy’s restructuring. This is the program of the US Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee.

Following Wolfe’s remarks, greetings to the meeting were given by a member of the the Pennsylvania and Ohio Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, commending postal workers for taking the historic step to found this new organization. He stressed that the strength of the working class is in its unity, declaring, “Teachers, nurses, steel workers, auto workers, railroad workers, petroleum workers, logistics workers, you name it, the whole working class across the nation and around the world needs to respond in unison to these systematic and simply horrific attacks upon every sector.”

A recently-hired postal worker described the inhumane treatment she faces at her station. She says she sought medical

attention for a serious bout of the flu, but her postmaster threatened to terminate her if she requested time off to recover. “I had the flu. I had kidney problems, and they were gonna put me in the hospital. [My postmaster] told me to go put my head on the desk and get through it. Otherwise, she’s gonna have to find somebody else.” The new carrier with the flu was afraid to file a grievance against her postmaster. “I’m scared to go to the union. I’m scared, I don’t know, because I’m scared of retaliation,” she said.

Another worker described the daily struggles at her small-town station in Oklahoma, where new associates are quickly burnt out and they cannot hire enough staff in any craft: “There are no PSEs on the clerk side, no CCAs on the city side and just one career carrier on the rural side.”

Career letter carriers are mandated to work on their days off, she said, for which they do not see compensation unless they file a grievance. Furthermore, city carriers are forced to run rural routes—a clear violation of both the rural and city contracts. Rural and city letter carriers are covered by different contracts and are in different unions, the National Rural Letter Carriers Association (NRLCA) and the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC).

“I’m getting fired up because we’re being taken advantage of, [they’re taking advantage] of our kindness to get the mail ran. We’re getting our [days off] taken away from us and are not getting paid for it. We’re just slaves. I just feel like we’re slaves to the USPS. The contract doesn’t mean anything, if [the union is] letting them violate even the most basic terms.”

A rural carrier agreed and added: “I’ve been told by our union [NRLCA] that if we’re mandated to carry a city route, we just have to do it, which is crossing crafts.”

Another rural carrier who has worked across west Texas said that everywhere workers are being forced to “work more hours for less.” She was deeply concerned about worker morale: “Stress levels are up. I have never, ever seen the morale as low as it is right now. What’s scary about that is at what point is someone just going to snap?”

“This is not going to get any better,” she continued. “I see the leadership become so brazen—their bullying and their lies, the gas lighting.”

Following on her heels, another rural carrier from Oklahoma

agreed that postal workers across crafts are at a breaking point: “They don’t call it [workplace shootings] ‘going Amazon.’ They don’t call it ‘going FedEx.’ They call it ‘going postal’ for a reason, because the system is designed to just torture you. And it’s not only designed that way, it’s like they enjoy it. There is a very passive aggressive culture and it’s a very sick and retaliatory toxic culture. I’m dealing with the same problems over and over.”

Another said the grievance process is just a process to diffuse and ignore issues, not address them. “As far as grievances, management doesn’t care and they literally say that. They’ll kind of laugh when they tell you to file a grievance.”

She continued, “There’s a lot of deliberate retaliation in the post office. And even your time off is a retaliation. Because when you get back, whether you’re sick or on vacation, it’s a disaster.”

The discussion then turned towards the strategy which workers need to fight back against the attacks on the post office. Many newcomers at the meeting asked for more information about the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which it sought to do and how they could become involved.

Tom Hall, a reporter for the *World Socialist Web Site*, responded by pointing to the founding statement of the Committee, which said:

In founding the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee, we are taking the first step in organizing that fight. We call upon our coworkers to join us and build up a powerful network linking rank-and-file workers at every station and distribution center across the United States. This broadly democratic structure, controlled by workers ourselves and not the union apparatus, will provide us with means to share information that is being withheld from us, to freely discuss strategy, and to coordinate joint actions across the country.

The purpose of the committee, and others like it, including postal workers rank-and-file committees in Britain and Germany, was to unite workers across the country, provide them with critical information which was being concealed from them—including the existence of the restructuring program, which many workers are not aware of—and to change the culture and the level of consciousness of rank-and-file postal workers in order to enable them to act independently, he said.

The aim of the committee is different from those who propose “pressuring” the union or punishing the existing bureaucrats by voting them out and replacing them with a different set of bureaucrats. At one point in the meeting, a campaign to decertify the NRLCA and replace it with the Teamsters union

was raised.

Hall sympathized with the anger of the 10,000 carriers who have signed the decertification petition so far and rejecting any notion that the NRLCA bureaucrats had any “right” to take workers’ dues money in exchange for sellouts such as the Rural Route Evaluated Compensation System (RRECS), which has slashed carriers’ wages by up to \$20,000 a year in some cases. But he warned that moving from the NRLCA to the Teamsters was like “jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire.”

He pointed in particular to the way in which the Teamsters rammed through a sellout deal last month at UPS, as well as blocking a strike last year in the railroad industry. In response, workers in the Teamsters have also formed rank-and-file committees at both UPS and in the railroad industry. The basic questions which all workers had to deal with, in unionized as well as non-union workplaces, was the development of democratic structures which they actually controlled and would not sell them out.

A founding member of the USPS Rank-and-File Committee added that she recently turned down a nomination for steward at her station: “I couldn’t represent my coworkers the way they should be because I know that the union is not going to support them, and it’s not going to support me either. It is a losing battle. And more so, I don’t believe in the union anymore—only the rank and file.”

Unlike the union bureaucracy, the rank-and-file committee is a democratic institution. Membership to the committee is simple, requiring agreement with the founding statement and affirming they do not hold a management or union position.

As the founding statement states: “The only way forward is to organize ourselves, put forward our own program of demands, and place rank-and-file workers in every position critical to our job security, safety, wages, bargaining and so on. We must prepare action from below to assert the will of 635,000 career and non-career USPS workers to make sure our needs and interests take absolute priority, and not the slash-and-burn policies of corporate-controlled politicians.”

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