Rural postal workers at the breaking point over Amazon package delivery, understaffing

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Anger among United States Postal Service (USPS) workers in Bemidji, a town in northern Minnesota, and other rural areas is building over demands that they prioritize Amazon deliveries over regular mail. Last month, postal workers in Bemidji picketed to draw attention to unbearable workloads and grueling work schedules, up to 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week.

In November, the contract for the delivery of Amazon packages in Bemidji was transferred from UPS to the post office, leading to days- and week-long delays in mail deliveries and a growing outcry by residents. The change also followed major overhauls nationwide this year as to how rural letter carriers are paid. This system, named the Rural Route Evaluated Compensation System (RRECS), already caused massive pay cuts of up to $20,000 a year.

While Amazon has had agreements with USPS since at least 2013, the online retail giant has increasingly used the postal service for so-called "last mile" delivery in rural areas. In its 2019 fiscal year, the US Postal Service was already delivering over 1.5 billion packages for Amazon, according to documents released under a Freedom of Information Act request.

Details of the contracts between Amazon and USPS have been kept from the public. However, USPS spokesman David Partenheimer stated recently, "Like any prudent business, we do not publicly discuss specifics of our business relationships."

In response to growing national media attention on their struggles, USPS employees in Bemidji reported being instructed not to mention Amazon or issues at their workplace, according to a report in the *Washington Post*. "If asked, they're to be referred to as 'Delivery Partners' or 'Distributors'" rather than Amazon, a Bemidji mail carrier told the *Washington Post*. "It's ridiculous." USPS workers also reported to the *Post* being told there could be "consequences" if they attended a recent public "listening session" in Bemidji held by state and local officials.

A rural letter carrier elsewhere in Minnesota described the extreme conditions workers face, telling the WSWS, "Our branch has been forced to work six days a week for 11-plus months. The week before Thanksgiving this year we were informed no more forcing on our off day which has lasted three weeks and now are back to forcing carriers on their off days.

"During the first three-fourths of the year we were short-staffed, and the average new hires only stayed six months if that. Most new hires get burned out working six days a week 12-hour days, barely get enough training, support or followup. It feels like we aren't even human, just pawns.

"Everyone deserves a balance of work/life. USPS treats everyone like we live to work for USPS and nothing else."

The issues are becoming increasingly prevalent in the postal service across the United States. USPS workers in Washington state have had a surge of incoming Amazon packages so large that tents were recently set up outside of the Friday Harbor, Washington, USPS facility to house the incoming packages, according to a report by a local Fox News affiliate. Deliveries are also being significantly delayed in several rural Washington towns.

A rural postal worker in Mississippi commented to the WSWS, "This Amazon deal is absolutely killing us rural carriers, we have no help, we are working 12- and 14-hour days. It's dangerous for us ladies to be out so late delivering Amazon. Our customers are so upset with regular mail being delivered so late.

"I know what's up. This damn Postmaster General DeJoy is trying to privatize the USPS."

USPS management, however, has arrogantly sought to dismiss reports of mail delays due to Amazon as "misinformation."

Replying to an inquiry by a Minnesota congressman over mail delays, a USPS representative wrote, "Let me begin by stating unequivocally that the U.S. Postal Service does not prioritize the delivery of mail or packages based on the customer or sender, including businesses such as Amazon. This is an unfortunate and inexplicable falsehood that I regret seeing congressional offices also expressing publicly."

In reality, both the recent articles in the *Washington Post* and the political intervention by Minnesota senators Amy Klobuchar, Tina Smith and other Democratic Party politicians are an expression of the nervousness and sensitivity by the ruling class to the explosive anger building up among postal

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workers. The *Post* is owned by former Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, the world's third-richest man, who has a fortune of $172 billion. Patty Stonesifer, the *Post*'s interim CEO, also sits on Amazon's board of directors.

"They are working 12 hours a day, six days a week"

At the December 5 "listening session" in Bemidji, attended by staff from Klobuchar and Smith's offices, one resident after another indicted the conditions letter carriers, and by extension, other sections of the working class face.

Government representatives, for their part, began the session by immediately trying to placate letter carriers. Attempting to evade any responsibility for the increasingly disastrous conditions facing postal workers, they claimed that they did not have the authority to change any policies.

Workers, their family members and retirees spoke of extremely despotic and exploitative working conditions following the implementation of the Amazon policy. The fact that rural letter carriers were threatened with disciplinary action for attending was openly stated at this session within the first 10 minutes.

The first speaker immediately denounced the prioritization of Amazon packages, stating, "One of our concerns is there are people who get life-giving medication delivered by mail. If Amazon packages are prioritized, how is that person going to get this medication?

"They're delivering mail at 11 o'clock at night. You tell us that they're not prioritizing Amazon, and that they're prioritizing packages. That is false. Last night, I was supposed to receive seven packages, and I only got two: they were both Amazon.

"I work in a community where I work in a group home setting. We have had diabetics not receive necessary supplies. We have people not getting their paychecks. It's not just postal workers who are getting screwed, it's all of us."

Tim, a retired letter carrier, added, "I have three kids, and they are rural letter carriers. They are working 12 hours a day, six days a week, and that's taking a toll on them. My daughter's blood pressure has gone up. My youngest son is mentally and emotionally drained; he has to put up a big front when he goes home with his kids. My oldest son has lost weight too. My daughter-in-law has been sent down to Brainerd [a distant rural town] because they have a mess, and she's even gone to Duluth [another distant city] to help out there. She's put in a lot of hours too. It's going to take a toll on people."

Another resident said, "They are delivering Amazon packages without the necessary equipment or tools, requiring them to make several trips back to the post office before they begin delivering regular postage." Many rural letter carriers have quit because of the policy, the worker added.

One worker at the meeting spoke at length about the decades-long efforts to privatize the postal service, referring to the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act of 2006, which required USPS to fund pension obligations for 50 years. He called for the dismissal of Louis DeJoy and those who supported him.

Minnesota Democratic senators Klobuchar (a candidate in the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries) and Smith have feigned shock and outrage over the mail delays and prioritization of Amazon deliveries, presenting themselves as fighting against the policy, releasing open letters requesting information from DeJoy and the postal Board of Governors.

These gestures are hypocritical on their face, as the USPS has been deliberately gutted and starved of funding under both Democratic and Republican party-controlled administrations. Klobuchar herself has backed attacks on postal workers contained within the "Postal Service Reform Act," which ended the postal worker healthcare system and forced retiring workers onto Medicaid, among other attacks. Additionally, contrary to Klobuchar's efforts to politically grandstand as an adversary of corporate attacks on public services, she voted along with her Democratic Senate colleagues to ban a railroad workers strike last year and impose a pro-corporate contract.

The way forward for postal workers opposing these measures is to turn to their allies in the working class and not to the big business politicians in the Democratic and Republican parties. Postal workers across the country have initiated the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee to take the struggle into the hands of the workers themselves and out of the hands of the political parties of Wall Street and the pro-corporate union bureaucracies.

The USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee is putting forward demands based on what workers need, not what the corporate-controlled parties claim is "affordable." These demands include an end to "RRECS, TIAREAP and other surveillance programs, the re-establishment of the 8-hour day, an immediate 25 percent pay increase to make up for decades of lost wages, full transparency in collective bargaining talks and an end to the Delivering for America program, among other demands."

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