

Post office debacle in Richmond, Virginia: “optimization” initiative leads to late or lost mail

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Work at USPS? Tell us what peak season was like at your location. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

The US Postal Service’s Sorting and Distribution Center (S&DC) in Richmond, Virginia became the source of frustration over the holidays as mail and packages seemed to vanish. The problem has been so severe that it has drawn public comments from local and federal officials and lawmakers.

“We weren’t getting bills, we weren’t getting birthday cards, we weren’t getting regular mail, junk mail, nothing. And it was not showing up a day or two later,” a resident of Richmond, Virginia told local news station 12 On Your Side in late November.

“Went from Ohio to Richmond in a day and a half and has been stuck in richmond for 8 days (today is the 6th of Dec) I need this package b4 christmas...it was 77\$,” a Reddit user complained.

“YOU MAY HAVE HOLIDAY PACKAGES JUST SITTING IN RICHMOND, VA DISTRIBUTION CENTER....It’s NOT a new problem,” a Facebook post stated.

Responding to the increasing numbers of complaints from residents, Richmond Commonwealth’s Attorney Colette McEachin called for a town hall to be held in late November or early December at the beginning of the peak season for the United States Postal Service (USPS). Despite signals from management at the Richmond S&DC that they would attend the meeting finally scheduled for Tuesday, Dec. 5, they backed out at the last minute, forcing its cancellation.

The disastrous situation in Richmond is the product of Delivering for America (DFA), Postmaster General Louis DeJoy’s ten-year restructuring plan to consolidate operations and close thousands of local post offices. The plan, which will reform the USPS network along an Amazon-style hub and spoke model, is aimed at cutting costs to prepare for the post office’s eventual privatization. The plan will cost tens of thousands of postal workers their jobs, and negatively

impact the convenience and timeliness of mail delivery by releasing details on what amounts to a need-to-know basis.

A case in point is the Richmond S&DC. On October 28, one month before the start of the peak season on Thanksgiving, the postal service launched its “Optimized Collections” initiative in Richmond. The initiative represents a significant shift in the way mail is transported between processing centers and post offices, and was undoubtedly a major contributor to late and missing mail that increased over the holidays.

Prior to the shift to Optimized Collections, trucks left processing centers early in the morning to transport the day’s mail to post offices for delivery. The trucks then returned to processing centers later in the day with outgoing mail picked up from local post offices, which were then sorted and prepared for transport by the next morning at the processing center. This system ensured that outgoing mail began its journey to its destination on the same day it was posted.

Under the new system, delivery units previously handled in post offices located within a 30-minute driving distance from an S&DC are now being handled directly at the larger facility. Letter carriers now transport outbound mail directly to the S&DC at the end of their shifts.

Post offices that are located beyond a 30-minute driving distance are shifting to a “milk-run” model of mail transportation. Much like a milkman once delivered milk to customers and picked up empty bottles in the same trip, trucks delivering mail to post offices in the morning will now pick up outbound mail from the previous day to be transported to the S&DC. In other words, outbound mail from the post offices is now delayed by a day under the new system.

Of the 500 post offices in the Richmond area, 330 of them fall under the Optimized Collections initiative. These post offices mainly reside in small and rural communities, which make up 42 percent of the region’s customers, all of whom

have been subject to mail delays since late October.

The Post Office has stated that, though Optimized Collections could lead to mail not being picked up on the calendar day it is received at the Post Office, all mail will still meet the “delivery standard.”

But as noted on the blog *Save the Post Office*, the shift to Optimized Collections discriminates against rural customers. Title 39 of The U.S. Code of Federal Regulations states, “In providing services...the Postal Service shall not, except as specifically authorized in this title, make any undue or unreasonable discrimination among users of the mails, nor shall it grant any undue or unreasonable preferences to any such user.”

A source who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* said mail processing was also slowed considerably when package sorting equipment was upgraded at the Richmond S&DC last year.

Ushered in with great fanfare by Postmaster General DeJoy himself, a High Output Package Sorter (HOPS) went online at the Richmond S&DC in August. It is one of 13 high-speed automated package sorting systems which were deployed in processing centers in the US over the last year. HOPS machines can handle up to 8,500 packages weighing up to 25 pounds in an hour.

Mail handlers at the facility were not given proper training on the automated system, according to the source. The machine “spits out a lot of rejects,” and “the computer software breaks down a lot,” they told the WSWS. These glitches have caused a slowdown of package processing as workers wait for someone to get the machine back on line.

Additionally, flat mail—essentially any mail such as bills, checks, and birthday cards that is not bundled mail or a package—is literally falling through the cracks at the Richmond S&DC. The source told the WSWS that bundled mail, such as catalogs and advertisements that large companies send out, is prioritized over flat mail, even though the machine that processes bundled mail can handle both.

Furthermore, flat mail is being processed on package sorting machines which allow envelopes to fall through the conveyor belt onto the floor beneath the machine. “[The news] keeps talking about how people are not getting their mail, and people need their medicine and, you know, checks and all that kind of stuff. And I see that stuff down under there, right? If no one takes the initiative to do anything or, say, take it to another area, it was there for two days,” the source said.

At the height of the holiday peak season, the source reported finding flat mail in hampers buried under packages destined for the package sorting machines. “I reached under there and said, ‘Golly, what is it?’ And it was something

dated from last week and it could be somebody's electric bill or something like that.”

When the hampers get dumped onto the package sorting machines, flat mail gets stuck under the packages or falls to the floor and does not get processed on time if, at all. The source stated that this was not a one off mistake. “I hope it's not intentional, but you know from the things that happened, all that seems like something intentional about it.”

The source said that the hampers are coming directly from post offices and pass three checkpoints before heading to the appropriate area to be processed. “It could be new people working in those areas that don't know any better and no one told them. And there could be just a management flaw where they're not teaching those people what to do, where it goes.”

USPS hired 5,480 seasonal employees to support mail processing during its peak season this year. New hires, combined with new processing machinery and a new system to transport mail to and from processing centers, likely combined to create the debacle in Richmond last year and is a further indictment of DFA.

Postal workers in all sections of the postal service are coming into struggle against the deleterious policies of DeJoy which are robbing them of their professions, their wages, and their health. This year, both the contracts of both the NRLCA and APWU will expire, and members of the NALC have been working without a contract since last May. Now is the time for rank-and-file postal workers to take matters into their own hands.

The founding statement of the Postal Workers Rank and File Committee stated:

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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