USPS city letter carriers kept in the dark as union preps for binding arbitration in contract talks

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Behind the backs of more than 275,000 members, the National Assocation of Letter Carriers (NALC) is moving towards imposing a new sellout contract through binding interest arbitration. Workers have been on the job for nearly eight months since their last contract expired in May and have received virtually no information about the status of talks since.

The new contract is a critical one for the United States Postal Service, which is in the midst of a sweeping restructuring program misnamed "Delivering for America." The Postal Service is massively consolidating its operations, with thousands of local post offices to be closed and tens of thousands of postal workers to lose their jobs in the coming years. The impact of these cuts has already been to seriously damage reliability and quality of service for customers; its real aim is to make USPS profitable to prepare for its eventual privatization.

DFA will force 100,000 city letter carriers out of their post office home bases and into Sorting and Delivery Centers (S&DCs) and other larger Amazon-like facilities. *Save the Post Office* has just reported 30 more Processing and Distribution Centers will be consolidated into S&DCs and similar facilities. Over 450 postal facilities across the US now have been consolidated or are scheduled to be consolidated under the DFA.

The next NALC contract will substantially affect the fate of countless city letter carriers under the new plan. The year 2024 will also be a key moment in the restructuring campaign as well as the fight against it from rank-and-file postal workers, as new centralized sorting hubs come on line and new contracts at all three major postal unions, including the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) and the National Rural Letter Carriers Association (NRLCA) are to be negotiated.

The union bureaucracy across all the postal unions is actively helping to enforce the DFA upon the membership. The critical issue facing postal workers is to organize themselves independently in order to fight a two-front war against both management and the corrupt union apparatus. The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee was founded late last year by workers across the US to organize such a campaign.

In his New Year message to the membership, National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) president Brian Renfroe paints a rosy picture of the status of contract talks. According to him, direct negotiations between NALC and USPS are still ongoing and the two have made progress on a number of issues.

Renfroe did not provide any details on what cuts the union has already agreed to. But Renfroe also included in his New Year's message a reference to workers' supposed responsibility to collaborate with the postal service to ensure the "long-term financial viability of our employer [which] remains a priority." NALC has also gone out of its way to promote DFA in its official *Postal Record* magazine, which carried a recent, false headline: "There Will Be No Post Office Closures or Employee Layoffs as Part of Our S&DC Roll Outs."

Renfroe and the NALC bureaucracy have reportedly already agreed to switch workers' compensation patients from doctors to physician assistants, saving money while providing worse care. Renfroe has also touted an accounting change to postal workers' already unstable pension system to allow the USPS to pay less into their retirement. This is on top of the handing over some $200 billion of postal workers' pre-funded retirement healthcare in the Postal Reform Act of 2022.

The cuts in the next contract are so severe that the union is seeking to remove workers' right to vote on the contract by steering talks towards binding interest

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arbitration. This involves the selection of a supposedly neutral third party arbitrator who will have the power to effectively impose a contract on which the rank-and-file members would have no ability to vote.

Renfroe confirmed that this was the direction that talks were headed in a recent conference of NALC officials in New Orleans.

This is not the first time that NALC has gone this route. One union insider described to the WSWS how the 2014 contract was also secured through this method:

In 2014, the union and the management staged a fake arbitration in which no hearings were held and which, in their written testimony, the union asked for a $12,000-per-year pay cut for letter carriers, and also asked for the creation of a non-career supplemental work force that all new hires would have to come in through and serve the first couple of years, during which they would be paid starvation wages. They asked the arbitration panel to make those changes, and when the arbitration panel complied with their request, they told the membership that it was all the arbitrator's idea, that they had nothing to do with the pay cuts or the creation of the non-career workforce.

The latest contracts with the other postal unions have also contained huge concessions. Arguably the biggest sellout was the NRLCA contract. Not only was the initial pay raise a derisory 1.3 percent with inadequate cost of living adjustments to account for historic inflation, the union signed off on a new Rural Route Route Evaluated Compensation System that has led to massive pay cuts. Roughly two-thirds of the 130,000 rural carrier work force have seen their pay cut, in some cases by up to $20,000 a year.

There were also massive takeaways in the last American Postal Workers Union (APWU) contract, including below inflation pay and a 2-tier wage structure, "ratified" under dubious circumstances with around 20 percent turnout.

NALC presents the arbitration process as a neutral arena, but in reality the arbitration system is designed to produce an agreement favorable to management. The exact same claims were made two years ago by the railroad unions about mediation under a Presidential Emergency Board. In reality, the result was a contract which continued to allow mass job cuts and overwork for railroaders, and did not even include a single day of sick leave for rail crews.

Opposition to this sellout was led by the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which released statements exposing the sabotage by union bureaucrats, held large meetings with hundreds of railroaders and organized informational pickets around the country. Its work was a major factor in the vote against the contract, which staggered not only the bureaucracy and the railroads, but the Biden White House which had brokered the deal.

But in response to this rebellion, the unions delayed strike action for months, buying time for Biden and Congress to come up with legislation to ban strike action.

Under binding interest arbitration, NALC and USPS are conspiring to do the same thing. It is an injunction is all but name, no doubt being cooked up with the close involvement of the White House.

City letter carriers must answer this danger by mobilizing alongside their coworkers in the APWU and NRLCA to defeat this conspiracy. Workers at every post office should meet to organize independent action committees, excluding union officials, and affiliate their groups with the national Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee. They should raise among their central demands:

- An immediate end to DFA and all job cuts.
- An end to TIREAP, RRECS and other new systems designed to monitor and discipline workers and steal their wages.
- Workers' control over route evaluation systems to prevent systematic fraud and "errors."
- The protection of benefits, with no cuts to healthcare or retirement.
- The protection of jobs of "non career track" second tier workers, opposing attempts to split high and low seniority workers against each other.
- An end to illegal prioritization of Amazon over mail, as well as illegal gutting of rural services in favor of city services.
- The imposition of new health and safety procedures to protect carriers and post office workers from extreme weather conditions. These procedures must be enforced by workers themselves, not management.

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