

Mail delayed for months in the Houston area as a result of “Delivering for America” restructuring program

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The United States Postal Service (USPS) is blaming employee absenteeism and bad weather for ongoing, months-long mail delays in Houston. A February 3 letter from Peter E. Pastre, Vice President of Government Relations and Public Policy for the USPS, to a Houston-area Congressman also cited “equipment failures” as another reason for the delay, an egregious understatement of the nature of the problem that has slowed mail to a crawl in the fourth most populous city in the United States.

In reality, the delays are due to new equipment being brought in as part of the post office’s misnamed Delivering for America program, a vast restructuring aimed at closing thousands of post offices and streamlining operations as a first step towards USPS’ eventual privatization.

USPS has announced \$5 billion in cuts over the next two years, which will lead to further job losses as the post office moves to cut or replace tens of thousands of jobs through automation. The WSWs has reported extensively on the jobs bloodbath taking place in UPS, the auto industry and the economy as a whole, in which corporations are weaponizing breakthroughs in automation and artificial intelligence to slash their workforces.

According to a worker inside the United States Postal Service’s (USPS) Houston Regional Processing and Distribution Center (RPDC), a new parcel sorting machine delivered before the beginning of the holiday peak season did not fit inside the building.

Installation of the new machine was halted when the postal service ran into structural problems moving it into the building. “They’ve been taking walls out. They’ve taken out a system of catwalks we used to have for the postal inspectors. They’re taking all those out just so they can fit the machine in the building,” the worker told local news station KHOU 11 News .

Two existing parcel sorting machines were removed in order to make room for the new sorter, leaving the facility with no

way to handle the increased volume of mail and packages over the holidays and causing unprocessed mail to sit for weeks.

The North Houston Processing & Distribution Center (P&DC) is undergoing a “complex transition” to an RPDC, according to a statement from a USPS spokesperson in January. The North Houston P&DC’s transition began almost a year ago in February during the first wave of the implementation of DFA’s hub and spoke network that will remake the USPS into a package delivery business like UPS, Amazon, and FedEx.

“Every open space, aside from the hallways, has mail or trash sitting there,” the worker told the news outlet. The backup has even impeded efforts to install the new parcel handling machine. According to the worker, “The mail backlog in the building has slowed contractors down. Can’t do their job with the congestion of the mail.”

In its statement released on January 22 in response to requests for information from Texas lawmakers, the USPS attributed the delays to “network modernization” as part of the Delivering for America plan to restructure the postal service. The statement attempted to mitigate the now months-long mail delays with banalities. “As with any transition, some unintended and temporary disruptions may occur.”

Since Postmaster General (PMG) Louis DeJoy announced Delivering for America in 2021, details about the implementation of his 10-year plan to overhaul the USPS have been withheld from scrutiny.

The Postal Regulatory Commission (PRC) has filed seven public information requests since DeJoy announced DFA for specific details on how DFA will be implemented. In early January, the USPS asked that the PRC’s recent request for information on the reconfiguration of how mail is transported between facilities be withdrawn because it does not fall “within the Commission’s authority,” essentially telling the post office regulator it’s none of their business.

The USPS’ ability to flaunt even formal public accountability stems from the fact that DFA has broad bipartisan support. DeJoy, a prominent Trump supporter, was appointed during his administration but has the support of the Democrats. Both parties came together in 2022 to pass the

Postal Service Reform Act, which ended requirements that the USPS pre-fund retiree health benefits.

Sham public comment meetings, known as Mail Processing Facility Reviews are being held in communities where mail processing will be impacted by DFA. As reported by the WSWS, USPS officials refuse to take questions from either the public or affected postal employees by insisting the meetings are only to take comments on the changes that have already been decided.

The Postal Board of Governors (PBOG), political appointees who oversee the operations of the USPS, limited public comment at its quarterly meetings in Washington D.C. to once a year at its November 2023 meeting. Previously, public comment was taken at every meeting of the PBOG. But as the rollout of DFA progressed, public comment has been curtailed at first to three minutes, then 90 seconds, then 25 seconds, then in-person only and now only at the November meeting.

Complete lack of transparency about the transition has created chaos in the USPS network which was exacerbated by the holiday peak season. According to the USPS, in 2022 the post office processed an average of 421.4 million pieces of mail a day. That rose substantially during the peak season.

Despite the increase in volume, DeJoy announced in the Post Office's quarterly publication, *The Eagle Magazine*, that seasonal hires for 2023 would be cut by 75 percent, from 40,000 to 10,000. The WSWS covered the struggles of mail handlers and carriers as they were inundated with packages from Amazon last December.

DeJoy also announced the "heavy investment in automation" in his DFA plan. Forty-seven new sorting machines were installed in facilities throughout the US a mere three months prior to the beginning of the 2023 holiday peak. The USPS did not say where these machines would be installed, but, as the holidays drew near, workers began reporting major delays and utter confusion in mail processing centers due to equipment upgrades.

As the WSWS reported at the beginning of this year, workers at the Richmond, Virginia Sorting and Delivery Center (S&DC) were not adequately trained on a new automated high output package sorter (HOPS) they received last August. Package processing frequently came to a halt when the machine broke down and workers had to wait for someone who knew how to restart it. Older processing machines had been removed to prevent workers from using them as backup when the new machine was inoperable.

Additionally, the USPS shifted to Optimized Collections in the Richmond area at the end of October, a significant change in when and how mail is transported between processing centers and post offices. It is difficult to know how the change in workflow impacted post offices; however, improperly sorted mail began arriving from post offices to the S&DC, which contributed to mail being delayed and even lost since the beginning of the holiday peak.

The severity of the mail delays in Richmond is still being uncovered. Last week, it was revealed that more than half of 870 cancer screening tests routed through the Richmond area were invalidated because they were returned to the testing center months after the two-week window closed, putting potentially hundreds of people at risk.

Reports have also surfaced of serious mail delays in the St. Louis, Missouri area. St. Louis is slated to become one of 61 regional hubs (RPDC) in PMG DeJoy's DFA plan. The USPS held a Mail Processing Facility Review meeting in November 2023 to take public comment on the proposed change in the St. Louis area post office.

Key support for the restructuring program is being given by the trade union bureaucracy. The National Association of Letter Carriers has kept its members working without a contract since late last spring and is moving toward binding arbitration. That will inevitably lead to a contract with historic concessions being imposed without even a vote by union members. The National Rural Letter Carriers Association signed off on a change to rural carriers' compensation which has led to huge wage cuts for most of the workforce, up to \$20,000 a year in some cases.

2024 is a significant year for the fight against DFA, with contracts for both the American Postal Workers Union and the National Rural Letter Carriers' Association expiring this year. Postal workers across the country must unite to prevent a jobs bloodbath and stop DFA's destruction of the postal service. But that requires a rebellion against the pro-management union apparatus.

That fight is being organized by the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee, founded last year by postal workers independently of the union functionaries. In its founding statement, the committee declared, "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."

To join or contact the committee, fill out the form below.



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