

United States Postal Service and city letter carriers move towards binding interest arbitration

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The United States Postal Service and the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) have moved closer towards binding interest arbitration, with both parties agreeing to select Dennis Nolan as arbitrator in potential future proceedings. More than 275,000 city letter carriers have been working without a new contract for nearly a year since the last deal expired last May.

The NALC bureaucracy presents both Nolan and the arbitration process itself as a neutral process through which the interests of management and the workers can be harmonized. In reality, binding interest arbitration is a thoroughly undemocratic measure through which a contract favorable to the post office will be imposed without even the fig-leaf of a vote by workers. It is provided for by anti-worker laws, on the books for decades, which ban federal employees from striking, in clear violation of workers' First Amendment right to free speech.

The selection of Nolan is a clear signal that the government intends to impose a brutal contract on postal workers. In October 2002, President George W. Bush appointed Nolan to the Presidential Board of Inquiry on the Work Stoppage in the San Francisco West Coast Ports, where a contract dispute between the Pacific Maritime Association, which represents shippers, and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union had shut down 29 West Coast ports.

Nolan and the rest of the board issued a report that declared: "We believe that the seeds of distrust have been widely sown, poisoning the atmosphere of mutual trust and respect which could enable a resolution of seemingly intractable issues. For example, the parties have been unable to agree even on such matters as the length of proposed temporary contract extensions although both know that their standoff costs the Nation billions of dollars. We have no confidence that the parties will resolve the West Coast ports dispute within a reasonable time."

The report was a critical link in the chain to more direct government intervention. Only three hours after the report was presented, a federal judge granted a request for an anti-strike injunction from the Bush administration, under the terms of the anti-worker Taft-Hartley Act.

The move towards binding interest arbitration would represent a

direct escalation against postal workers on the part of the federal government. It would also come as contracts expire this year for the other two largest postal unions, the American Postal Workers Union and the National Rural Letter Carriers' Association, making 2024 a critical year in the fight by workers in defense of the post office.

Nolan's role today will be to help implement a sweeping restructuring program called "Delivering for America" in favor of the Postal Service. The misnamed program involves the closure of thousands of local post offices, the shedding of tens of thousands of jobs and the consolidation of the postal network into a small number of larger, heavily automated facilities. The real aim is to make USPS profitable and prepare for its eventual privatization.

The impact of DFA on the post office has already been profound and disruptive. USPS has already opened new sorting and delivery centers across the country and closed down local offices near major facilities, leading to massive backlogs in deliveries. Under a new compensation system, most rural carriers have seen huge cuts to wages, including many by \$10,000 or more per year.

The NALC bureaucracy has been engaged in talks for nearly a year behind the backs of rank-and-file postal workers, while deliberately concealing the scale of the restructuring which is underway and the threat it poses to workers' jobs. When questioned directly by a WSWs reporter, NALC President Brian Renfrow flatly denied that NALC members would lose their jobs under the program.

In reality, NALC have been maneuvering towards binding interest arbitration for months because both they and the Post Office management understand that rank-and-file workers will never vote to accept a contract along the lines which they are working out behind the scenes.

The position of the NALC bureaucrats mirrors that of the Teamsters at UPS and the United Auto Workers. At UPS and in the auto industry, each pushed through contracts last year which they falsely claimed to be historic "victories," while concealing the massive layoffs which were being planned at the time and are now underway. As in Delivering for America, management in both UPS and the auto industry are utilizing new technologies such as automation to eliminate huge swaths of the workforce.

Deep cuts to postal services are also taking place around the world, including at Royal Mail in the United Kingdom and at

Deutsche Post in Germany. Post offices in both countries were already privatized years ago.

The situation facing postal workers urgently requires the rank and file to organize against the union-government conspiracy to impose massive job cuts on postal workers. Last year, workers founded the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee, in order 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,” according to its founding statement. “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.”

The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee is part of a growing network of such committees fighting against the pro-corporate bureaucracies that control the unions and for workers’ control around the world, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. It includes committees formed by postal workers in Britain, Germany and Australia, UPS workers, autoworkers, educators and others.

A critical experience was made in late 2022 by the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, where workers are under similar anti-strike laws. For months, the railroad unions tried to focus workers’ attention on mediation under a Presidential Emergency Board (PEB), claiming that this would provide a forum for workers to seek redress against 80-hour workweeks, no paid sick leave, tens of thousands of job losses and other brutal working conditions. Instead, the PEB, handpicked by the Biden Administration, presented a contract proposal which sided with the railroads on every essential issue.

In response, workers founded the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee to fight against the entire pro-corporate framework to which the railroad workers were being subjected. In spite of attempts at intimidation and outright fraud by the union bureaucracy, workers voted down the Biden-sponsored contract. In response, the rail unions delayed for months in order to buy Congress time to pass legislation to ban a strike and impose the same contract.

In its founding statement, the RWRFC declared:

Union officials will no doubt attempt to scare us by saying that Congress will intervene against a strike. It is certainly true that Congress will try to issue an injunction. But that only exposes the complete bankruptcy of the unions’ orientation towards the government, the Democratic Party and the Biden administration. Biden, the so-called most ‘pro-union president in American history,’ is using the union bureaucracies to suppress strikes and force through garbage contracts, especially in critical infrastructure...

This shows we are in a fight not just against the railroads but against an entire political system controlled by the corporate oligarchy. But we are more powerful than any Congress. Many times throughout history, workers have gone toe-to-toe with the courts, Congress and even the

White House and defeated attempts to impose injunctions. That can happen again. It depends not only on organizing ourselves independently to ensure maximum unity and solidarity, but also that we hold no illusions in the bought-and-paid-for political stooges of Wall Street.

As in the railroads and in other industries, the opposition of the rank and file at the post office has also led inevitably to a clash with the government and the union bureaucracy. In 1970, 200,000 postal workers carried out a national wildcat strike against plans by the Nixon administration to demote the post office from a cabinet-level department within the federal government into an independent federal agency, the first step in its eventual privatization.

When the postal union bureaucracy regained control of the situation, it imposed a settlement which, while containing substantial wage increases, paved the way for the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970. This led to the creation of the United States Postal Service under the control of a Board of Governors stacked with direct representatives of corporate American and Wall Street. It also maintained the anti-democratic strike bans which postal workers had to defy in order to carry out the strike, giving the union officials a convenient legal pretext to clamp down on rank-and-file opposition.

Postal workers must be prepared for a major struggle this year against the biggest attacks on jobs and working conditions in generations. This requires the building of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee as an alternative leadership to the bureaucracy, controlled by workers themselves, and committed to a fight against the entire illegitimate government-controlled labor framework which they have been forced to work under for decades.



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