

What's at stake in the contract for US rural letter carriers

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Take up the fight against Delivering for America! Join the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee by emailing USPSRankandFileCommittee@gmail.com or filling out the form at the bottom of this article.

At midnight on May 20, the contract between the National Rural Letter Carriers Association (NRLCA) and United States Postal Service (USPS) expired. The three-year span of that agreement saw historic sellouts by the union bureaucracy to USPS administrators and Postmaster General Louis DeJoy. As part of the sweeping Delivering for America restructuring plan (DFA), a new Rural Route Evaluated Compensation System (RRECS) slashed wages by thousands and even tens of thousands of dollars for most rural carriers.

The next contract, covering nearly 130,000 workers, is an opportunity for rural carriers to mobilize a rank-and-file rebellion to fight the destruction of the post office, which is being carried out with the support of both big-business parties and the postal union bureaucracy.

That workers are in a fight against both management and the union apparatus was underscored on March 7, when NRLCA president Don Maston praised “Louis” and declared the union “is encouraged by the Delivering for America plan and supports its goals.”

This fight requires that postal workers have structures they control in order to take the initiative out of the hands of this management-union conspiracy. This means the development of the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee (USPS-WRFC), founded last year to “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,” in the words of its founding statement.

The USPS-WRFC is part of a global network of committees founded at national post offices across the world, including Britain, Germany, Canada and Australia where workers are facing similar attacks.

“Delivering for America” delivers service collapse

DFA seeks to reduce the postal workforce by tens of thousands of people, dump pension obligations and benefits, replace stable jobs with high-surveillance gig-work, and shred the decades-old universal service obligation in favor of catering to the Postal Service’s high-volume corporate customers like Amazon.

The plan aims to restructure the postal network away from easily accessible post offices, which handle processing, delivery and retail services, to an Amazon-style hub-and-spoke model relying on massive, high-automation processing centers run by a far smaller workforce. DFA seeks to lay off tens of thousands of processing workers, while requiring overburdened carriers to double their average route length to pick up and

drop off mail from regional centers.

Pilot cities where regional processing centers were first introduced, like Atlanta, Charlotte and Richmond, saw service levels collapse, lost mail and dramatically longer mail routes. Nationwide changes like ending air service contracts, which had a negligible impact on expenses, have resulted in a massive 1-2 day slowdown for 40 percent of first-class mail.

The disastrous early results have forced a temporary pause in DFA’s implementation until after the US presidential elections. But this is no reason for complacency. One way or the other, DeJoy and his backers in the Democratic and Republican parties aim to privatize the 250-year-old Postal Service, as was done in recent decades to the UK’s Royal Mail and Germany’s Deutsche Post.

Delivering for America is not simply a rash policy by a rogue Postmaster General but part of a global jobs bloodbath affecting virtually every industry. This is driven in particular by the use of automation and other new labor-saving technologies, which could be used to ease the burden of work and improve workers’ standard of living, to instead maximize profits by eliminating whole sections of the workforce.

Similar restructuring plans are being carried out at post offices around the world, as well as at private competitors. UPS has announced it plans to close at least 200 facilities in the US as part of its “Network of the Future” program, in which the company plans to “automate everything.”

NRLCA bureaucrats embrace hated surveillance system

Rural carriers are especially impacted by the 2022 implementation of a digital program, RRECS, which has lowered the wages of two-thirds of letter carriers by as much as \$10,000 and up to \$20,000.

While rural carriers have to carry a GPS device at all times, the compensation they receive for their routes are based on twice-yearly evaluations called “mini mail surveys.” Workers widely believe that volumes during these counts are manipulated in order to cheat workers out of pay.

While postal workers are livid that their livelihoods and retirement plans have been destroyed, union bureaucrats pat themselves on the back for pushing through these destructive changes demanded for years by Republican and Democratic politicians.

NRLCA President Maston said of RRECS during his bargaining opening statement, “We have successfully achieved an objectively fair system of evaluating rural routes while maintaining rural delivery as the most effective mode of delivery in the Postal Service.” That is, it is the most cost-effective for the level of worker exploitation.

Three mail surveys have been completed with three rounds of adjustments since RRECS was introduced, but carriers have not been made whole. In fact, many have continued to *lose* hours and wages,

despite carrying vastly more parcels.

To detract attention from this hated program, the NRLCA has filed a national grievance over interim adjustments, or smaller corrections, that have not been forthcoming. They are posing as workers' defenders, even as they undemocratically agreed to RRECS in 2012, did nothing to warn members for a decade, did nothing to protect workers when it launched and continue to sing its praises.

Global heat waves point to worsening conditions for workers

Global average temperatures have broken new records for years, and now the Pacific Ocean is entering an El Niño warming period that will further exacerbate the safety risks to mail carriers and other laborers.

This month marks the one-year anniversary of the death of Dallas, Texas city letter carrier, Eugene Gates, who collapsed on the job after 36 years, shortly after receiving his first write-up in an otherwise spotless career. This occurred soon after city carriers were forced to adopt their own surveillance program, the Technology Integrated Alternative Route Evaluation and Adjustment Process (TIAREP), which penalizes workers for "stationary events."

With rural routes expected to double in length to reach regional centers, carriers are further exposed to brutal weather, particularly since many postal vehicles are decades old and falling apart, while rural carriers are expected to drive their personal vehicles if none are available. Some workers cannot afford the fuel to even keep their A/C on.

Particularly vulnerable are the newly-hired Rural Carrier Associates (RCAs). These second-tier workers can be forced to run routes for over 12-hours a day under already abusive conditions. The union negotiated the introduction of tiers and hyper-exploitation of RCAs in exchange for minuscule concessions to regular workers, but in reality, the tier system suppresses the wages of all.

Union-management conspiracy against postal workers

The NRLCA bureaucracy is not unique in deceiving and betraying its members. The city carriers' union, the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC), agreed to the implementation of the TIAREAP surveillance system in back-room arbitration and secretly expanded it, much as NRLCA adopted RRECS, without even a vote of its members.

City carriers have been working without a contract for over a year, and the NALC bureaucracy has provided mere whispers of what it is cooking up behind their backs, in a stage-managed play to keep members in the dark.

Clerks, maintenance and other postal crafts represented by the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) likewise have a looming contract expiration this summer. The APWU was a major cheerleader for the 2022 Postal Service Reform Act, which gutted the postal healthcare program and turned workers over to Medicare.

These three major postal unions covering hundreds of thousands of American workers are helping to implement the most serious attacks on their jobs, safety, wages, and benefits in modern USPS history. At a time when their jobs are being transformed into high-surveillance gig work or automated away entirely, and trillions are funneled into unpopular wars, the bureaucracy is responding by closing ranks with management even more closely.

Build rank-and-file committees!

The fact that all three national postal contracts have either expired or are set to expire this year puts postal workers in a powerful position to wage a united fight to win their demands. Postal workers are eager to wage a struggle against management's endless abuses.

But this fight cannot be won through grievances, legal maneuvers, pressure campaigns to local Democrats or Republicans, or by entrusting union bureaucrats to struggle on our behalf. Real change will only come from taking matters into our own hands.

Last September, postal workers formed the USPS Rank-and-File Committee to organize precisely this movement. In the committee's founding statement, we declared:

Postal workers need to be clear that this is a political fight against both corporate-controlled parties over the allocation of society's resources. Any program of demands that begins with the premise that workers have to continue working until they literally drop dead on the job is a non-starter.

To achieve our demands we must organize rank-and-file committees in every workplace and unify them coast to coast, across rural and city carriers, and across vehicle operators, technicians, clerks, mail handlers and all crafts.

Those demands included:

- Full transparency in collective bargaining, including live-cast negotiations, distributing the full text of tentative agreements to all workers and electing a bargaining committee composed of trusted rank-and-file workers.
- Ending RRECS and other piecework systems, and back pay paid for all wages lost under RRECS.
- Ending TIAREAP and other demeaning surveillance systems.
- An immediate one-year 25 percent pay increase to make up for decades of wage theft and declining wages, as well as cost-of-living adjustments tied to inflation.
- Full funding for pensions and health care for all current workers and retirees.

If you agree with this, join us! Contact the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee by filling out the contact form below or emailing USPSRankandFileCommittee@gmail.com today.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact