

USPS worker dies in Fayetteville, North Carolina after shift in mail truck on 95-degree day

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US postal worker Wednesday “Wendy” Johnson died on June 6 after working for hours in the back of a mail truck in Fayetteville, North Carolina in record temperatures. Local news reports relate that Johnson was found unresponsive in a restroom 15 minutes after returning to the post office. She later died at Cape Fear Valley Hospital. She was 51 years old and a 20-year veteran of the US Postal Service.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is investigating Johnson’s death as heat related. This June was the second hottest on record since 1887 by half of a degree, with an average daily temperature of 80.9 degrees, the result of the steady upward trend of hotter and longer heat waves since 1961.

OSHA guidelines warn that when the Heat Index (HI) reaches 80 degrees Fahrenheit (27°C) or higher, there is a significant increase in serious heat-related illnesses and injuries among workers, particularly in workplaces where employees are engaged in strenuous activities such as shifting and delivering packages in the back of a mail truck. As the HI climbs to 95 degrees and beyond, the risks rise further.

While the temperature on June 6 was 95 degrees Fahrenheit, the temperature in the back of the mail truck in which Johnson was riding was 102 degrees, according to texts the worker sent to her family that day.

Heat is the second-leading cause of injury to USPS workers, comprising 14 percent of all on-the-job injuries in the Postal Service. Between 2015 and 2023,

there have been 160 reports of heat-related injury by postal workers, according to OSHA. Between 2012 and 2023, seven USPS workers died due to heat while on the job.

Johnson’s death occurred two weeks short of the one-year anniversary of the death of veteran Dallas, Texas mail carrier Eugene Gates Jr. of heat stroke. Gates died after having received a disciplinary letter indicating that an investigation had revealed he was “in violation of postal rules and regulations,” as determined by the TIAREAP surveillance system, which tracks every minute of a letter carrier’s route, including pauses for water and cool air which can be life-saving when working in high temperatures.

It was 110 degrees in Dallas the day Gates died; his internal body temperature at the time of death was recorded as 104 degrees.

Both workers’ deaths are the result of systemic work speedup imposed on both city and rural carriers. New evaluation systems for each, TIAREAP for city carriers and RRECS for rural carriers, were implemented through agreements between the USPS and the union bureaucracies in the past two years, and have had disastrous impacts on carriers’ wages and working conditions.

It is not clear in media reports whether Wendy Johnson was a rural or city carrier. However, social media posts indicate that, as a supervisor, Wendy Johnson was likely performing a route evaluation the day she died, known as a 99, which requires a supervisor to ride along with a carrier to assess the time it takes a carrier to complete a route.

Such route evaluations are routinely done June through August, the hottest months in the year. As a

former USPS supervisor told the WSWS, “They do it in the summer when mail [count] is lighter to screw the carrier.”

Grumman Long Life Vehicles (LLVs), like the one Johnson rode in on the day she died, are not air conditioned. Often referred to as “easy bake ovens” by postal workers, temperatures in the back of LLVs have been recorded as high as 120 degrees. Carriers are equipped with a small “comfort” fan that sits on the dashboard of their vehicle about which one carrier joked on Reddit “just turn that oven on wheels into an air fryer on wheels.”

In 2017, mail carrier Peggy Frank was found unresponsive in her LLV on a 117-degree day in Woodland Hills, California.

Frank could not be revived, and a Los Angeles coroner determined hyperthermia was the cause of her death. OSHA fined the USPS \$150,000 for its violation of “programs and procedures” in place for mail carriers working in high temperatures. The agency also found that USPS repeatedly violated “record-keeping requirements related to recording heat stress incidents.”

In 2018, the Postal Service implemented its Heat Illness Prevention Program (HIPP). Under HIPP, supervisors in every post office are required to inform letter carriers of safety measures in extreme heat such as taking frequent breaks in cooler conditions. Carriers must watch a 20-minute video and take a quiz on the signs and symptoms of heat-related illness.

The death of Eugene Gates in 2023 put a spotlight on the US Postal Service’s heat safety procedures. According to Politico’s E & E News, Gates had not received the required annual HIPP training. However, his managers “falsified” official records to indicate he had completed the training. Gates was among over 2,000 carriers in 10 states whose records were similarly altered to show heat safety training had been delivered when it hadn’t.

E&E News also reported that eight letter carriers in Georgia, Florida and the Carolinas suffered heat-related illnesses last summer and almost all had not gone through the safety training, though their records claimed they had.

In one case, a mail carrier in Florida “stumbled into a fire station along his route, where firefighters started an intravenous line to rehydrate him” before he was transported to a nearby hospital.

In response to grievances filed by workers, the USPS has admitted to falsifying training records in only three locations: Knoxville, Tennessee, Brunswick, Georgia, and Naples, Florida. However, thousands more grievances are still pending throughout the country.

Despite these admissions, the USPS has taken few steps to ensure the health and safety of carriers in extreme heat conditions. In response to a request by the Committee on Oversight and Accountability after the death of Eugene Gates, carriers in Texas start their routes a half an hour earlier to take advantage of cooler morning temperatures.

Still, upwards of 64 percent of all mail trucks remain without air conditioning. Pressure brought on by the TIAREAP and RRECS systems to deliver increasingly more packages in less time is forcing carriers to take risks with their health in order to comply with unrealistic route evaluations and avoid disciplinary action.

On July 2, the US Department of Labor announced it had proposed a rule to reduce the number of injuries, illnesses, and deaths of indoor and outdoor workers due to heat. It will take months, if not years, for the rule to make its way through the approval process.

The proposal is similar to the Postal Service’s HIPP program and will no doubt be subject to similar fraudulent practices by employers as OSHA has approximately 1,850 inspectors responsible for enforcing safety rules for 130 million workers at 8 million work sites in the United States.

Rank-and-file postal workers must take the issue of their health and safety into their own hands. Management has already demonstrated it is willing to endanger the lives of its carriers through fraudulent measures. The postal workers’ union bureaucracies have exacerbated the threat to their members’ lives by colluding with the Postal Service in the implementation of the punitive TIAREAP and RRECS systems.

Postal workers must form rank-and-file committees, independent of their treacherous unions, to take up the fight for safe and humane working conditions.



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