

“It’s almost like the letter carriers have been to war. They have shell shock and PTSD”: Canada Post worker speaks out on dangerous working conditions

Penny Smith
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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently interviewed a member of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC) from Montreal about his experiences in the workplace at Canada Post. The PWRFC was recently established by postal workers with the aim of the rank and file seizing control of their contract struggle from the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) bureaucracy.

CUPW is in a corporatist alliance with Canada Post management and the NDP-backed Liberal government and has sabotaged postal workers’ struggles for decades while ramming through round after round of concessions. We encourage all postal workers who want to speak out about their conditions and join a genuine struggle to overturn the concessions imposed by management and CUPW to contact the PWRFC by filling out the form at the end of this article.

Summing up his view of the workplace in Montreal where he is based, the postal worker said,

It’s almost like the letter carriers have been to war. They have shell shock and PTSD. The supervisors have quotas essentially. For them to make certain targets, they have to do X, Y or Z on the floor. So they’re seen as the bad guys, they’re given abuse, they get fed up, they don’t do the job that maybe they should do.

Then on the other side, the workers get jaded and they get fed up. And there is frustration, exhaustion and demoralization. That’s not the right approach to take. But it’s the culture of the company that comes from the top down. It’s a profit-based, pressure situation.

Giving an example of the pressure from management he was referring to, the worker continued,

It’s kind of poisonous when the main concern is that we didn’t have 20,000 packages go through the system

yesterday. Okay, but if you look at the big picture, that’s only going to happen for a couple of months maybe, but then we get into Christmas rush, and it goes faster and then the numbers go up. They call those numbers “values,” and they’re always dissatisfied with them. Then they give the employees a harder time and give out more 24-hour notices. And they’re going to be looking at their watch when people are missing on the floor.

I saw people get timed when they’re going to the bathroom. You know, I understand that we’re in the Amazon era now. I’ve heard horror stories of Amazon employees that weren’t allowed to go to the bathroom. I don’t know what is myth or reality, but where there’s smoke, there’s always a bit of fire.

On top of profit-driven speedup, postal workers confront conditions that put their health and wellbeing at risk. The worker recounted how he has been on short-term disability since January due to the impact the workplace had on his mental and physical health. He explained,

In terms of my biggest issue, there are more and more allergens, and more dust. You go outside and there’s so much construction and our breathing is being affected on a daily basis. We’re hoping that when we go to our job, we’re going to have a decent quality of air, so that we’re not having that extra stress on our systems. You’re more tired because you’re not getting enough oxygen. If you have slight asthma, it could become aggravated. My problem is allergies and sinus issues. I’d blow my nose at work and it would come out black.

During the pandemic, we had masks. At some point, I thought, “Well, maybe I’ll keep it on.” And maybe I won’t have the majority of the stuff going into my body, like dirt and God knows what. We don’t even know what it is. It just comes raining down above your head and then

you notice there's a pile of black powder, rubber particles or whatever. There's a major issue of contamination from foreign substances that we shouldn't be breathing in. And then it's like, why are my eyes irritated? Why is my mouth so dry? I would always mention these issues in our anonymous little reviews. I would be honest about it. And the air quality is a big, big thing.

He recalled one incident in particular that underscored management's indifference to working conditions:

One day I was coding as part of a department and all of a sudden there's a haze around, like smoke from a fire that had started somewhere. But there's no alarm going off and there's no supervisor coming. No one came and said, "Don't worry. We're looking into it. If you have breathing issues, you can go to the break room or somewhere away." None of it was proactive. So myself and a colleague both approached the supervisor. My colleague was more well versed than me and knew that if something wasn't safe we have a right to refuse work or at least entitled to some confirmation that the situation is going to be looked at promptly.

Management's ruthless pursuit of profit at the expense of the workers goes unchallenged by CUPW, which accepts the premise that Canada Post should be run as a profit-making concern. Whenever governments have intervened on the side of management to criminalize postal workers' struggles against these conditions, as in 2011 under the Conservatives and in 2018 under the Liberals, the CUPW bureaucracy has rolled over without a fight.

Whether led by a typical right-wing bureaucrat or a "left"-talking militant like Mike Palecek, the union bureaucracy bitterly opposed expanding the postal workers' struggle to other sections of the working class and developing the fight as a political struggle against capitalist austerity and the corporatist alliance of Canada Post management, the government, and union apparatus.

A further consequence of the sabotaging of worker resistance by the CUPW bureaucracy is the increasing use by management of technology to increase workloads. The worker recounted several incidents at his plant:

With the parcels per hour issues, they want all conveyors loaded up 100 percent all the time.

They had a robot arm that was trying to feed the conveyor. They bought it pretty much, "on loan." They took away two positions to put the massive piece of machinery in the parcel injection site and in the end, it was doing more harm than good.

So then it became a joke, but those two positions were still gone. And you're still getting the same volume that

needs to be on the conveyor, right? It's backing up and backing up. If there's a major push by management to do your job, you're constantly moving in a way that leaves you with a sore lower back. And you're asking, is this normal that my back is hurting and shouldn't this thing be more ergonomic?

They've installed a whole new and very expensive conveyor system in Montreal, and it was supposed to be built only one story high. What did they do? They built it two or three stories high. So, there's always service issues. There were always packages that were too heavy being loaded into the system because it wasn't calibrated. It didn't know to dump off the car parts and the ball bearings and the kettle bell training stuff into an area for oversized packages. They overestimated what the system could take in. But when you're on the receiving end of it, what's coming down the chute are heavy items and your hands are out there dealing with something and you don't always have your eyes up to see what's next.

There was a car muffler that was cut loose on a conveyor, and it caused a lot of issues. There was a kettle bell that just rolled off and fell to the floor right beside somebody because there wasn't a proper guard on the side of the conveyor because the box wasn't made to contain a ball. It left a dent on the floor, you know. This is not safe for us.

The worker is determined to fight back against these conditions, recognizing that they are the product of decisions taken by management and successive governments with the collusion of the union top brass. He commented in conclusion,

It could be an excellent job. It used to be. You hear stories from older postal workers who started on the bottom and got full time right away. Then you're like, okay, what happened?

Was it just the government that put pressure? No. Everybody's belts got tightened. Every company, not just Canada Post, wants to save a penny, a buck.

I want to be optimistic. I want to be part of a movement to make things better because I don't like to see that it's so dilapidated, beat up. At some point, you've got to change direction. You've got to navigate in a different way.

To get involved with the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee, fill out the form below.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact