

Federal arbitrator imposes concession contract on US city letter carriers, while move towards privatization continues

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An arbitrator announced Tuesday that it has imposed a concession contract on members of the National Association of Letter Carriers. The contract is virtually identical to the one which workers rejected by 70 percent earlier this year. Because the new deal was reached through binding arbitration, mandatory for federal workers, NALC members will not even get to vote this time.

The contract contains a provocative series of pay increases of 1.3, 1.4 and 1.5 percent over three years, only 0.2 percent better than the contract workers rejected. The contract also contains a 1 percent plus 50-cent-per-hour raise for second-tier City Carrier Assistants, which still leaves them far behind career employees. City letter carriers will still make less even than UPS drivers, themselves under attack through massive job cuts under the company's "Network of the Future" program.

Letter carriers, who only two days before participated in nationwide rallies sponsored by NALC, reacted furiously. "Anyone else feel like a fool?" one postal worker said on social media. "They had us all out there with their 'Hell No' and 'Fight Like Hell' gear on on Sunday chanting that when we fight we win[,] while this s*** contract was signed and done by Friday."

Another postal worker told the WSWS: "when [NALC President Brian] Renfroe agreed to that [first] tentative agreement, at that point it didn't matter whether it was voted down, because his deal ensured that any arbitration proceedings would be perfunctory, like what just happened."

Worst of all, the contract sets the stage for more attacks on USPS, including its likely privatization. Four years into the "Delivering for America" restructuring program, the Trump administration aims to destroy USPS as part of its broader attack on all federal agencies that are not directly related to the police, the military or enriching the oligarchy.

Less than two weeks ago, Postmaster General Louis DeJoy announced a deal with Elon Musk's "Department of Government Efficiency" to help USPS management find places to slash spending. Musk had earlier declared his support for privatizing the post office.

Unless stopped by the working class, this will lead to tens of thousands of job cuts, more facility closures and the end of USPS as a public service.

This Monday, the day before the contract was announced, DeJoy officially resigned his post. Though DeJoy is a Trump ally and donor, his replacement will no doubt be one even more aligned with the destruction of USPS. DeJoy's resignation also sets up a potential windfall for himself through privatization, given the fact that he owns a company that contracts with the post office.

The defiance of workers' clear democratic will, expressed in the first vote, for inflation-busting raises, job protections and the raising of the second-tier CCA position to full pay, is part of a broader attack under Trump against all democratic rights, as it aims to set up a dictatorship. Republicans in the House are also considering a bill that would codify Trump's "right" to rip up collective bargaining agreements with federal employees through executive orders.

The response of the union bureaucracy across the country, and by NALC in particular, has emboldened Trump. NALC has insisted that workers abide by a federally-mandated "bargaining" process that denies workers their right to strike, even as Trump violates the law at will. NALC and the other postal unions are even offering their assistance in finding places to save money.

Workers cannot accept this process as legitimate. As far as workers are concerned, arbitration has solved nothing. Workers have every right to take measures that they deem necessary in order to save USPS and fight the drive towards dictatorship. They must learn from the example of the 1970 wildcat strike, where rank-and-file postal workers fought against earlier attacks under the Nixon administration.

Such a fight today requires that workers mobilize themselves from below, through the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee, against both Trump and his enablers in the unions and the Democratic Party. As the USPSWRFC declared in a statement following the rejection of the first agreement: “In asserting our independence, we will put ourselves in the best possible position to face down the attacks that are coming.”

Renfroe and his “opposition”

On Tuesday, NALC president Brian Renfroe issued a statement endorsing the deal’s microscopic wage increases, claiming that they “address our key objectives regarding higher starting pay.”

Renfroe’s statement did not even mention Delivering for America, which the union explicitly supports, nor Trump, DOGE or the threat to privatize the post office. NALC and the other postal unions responded to the DOGE agreement by offering management to help find cost savings on their own.

In a separate statement on DeJoy’s resignation, NALC declared: “The next postmaster general must continue modernizing and investing in USPS’ infrastructure while maintaining quality universal service funded by postage, not taxpayer dollars.” This statement is entirely compatible with support for privatization, although the statement also contains a pro forma call for the new postmaster general to be someone who “believes in agency as a public service.” The bureaucracy’s sole concern, no matter how many workers lose their jobs and no matter how degraded service is by profit interests, is that they retain their “seat at the table” and their six-figure salaries.

Renfroe is deeply hated by letter carriers as a management figure. Opposition factions, however, are maneuvering to try and prevent this anger from developing into a fight against the bureaucracy as a whole, presenting the issue only as Renfroe as an individual.

This includes groups like Movement for a Fighting NALC, Concerned Letter Carriers, and Mike Caref, a mid-level bureaucrat running for union president in next year’s election. These are broadly backed by the Democratic Socialists of America and other pseudo-left groups that are also providing cover for the Democrats’ collaboration with Trump.

In a response to the contract, Caref denounced the deal but then attacked Renfroe for refusing “to take us to arbitration in the summer of 2023.” In plain language, this amounts to a

complaint that the sellout was not imposed quickly enough. No contract acceptable to workers is possible in a system that robs them of the right to strike and vote on their own contract.

Caref does not call on workers to prepare for any actions from below in defiance of the bureaucracy. Instead, he stresses, “Our Constitution only gives us two options. We can either accept or we can reject the terms of a Tentative Agreement.”

Workers will simply have to wait for when “our contract will expire in 424 days,” to file charges against Renfroe and to wait until 2026 to vote for Caref as the new NALC president.

This plays entirely into Trump’s hands, who is also not mentioned in Caref’s letter. In 424 days, USPS may not even exist, if the Trump administration has its way. The more urgent the situation, the more the bureaucrats insist that workers do nothing.

Postal workers cannot wait for the “normal” process to work out—a process which, at any rate, would do no more than replace one bureaucrat with another. Caref wants to follow in the footsteps of Shawn Fain in the United Auto Workers and Sean O’Brien of the Teamsters, who yesterday were hailed as “reform” presidents and who are today imposing mass layoffs while working with Trump.

New pathways of struggle have to be created to prepare action from below. This means the development of a network of rank-and-file committees, excluding union officials and management stool pigeons, which unite postal workers with their allies across the federal workforce, workers in other industries and postal workers in other countries also fighting privatization and its aftermath.



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