“Every worker has a stake”: In public meeting, USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee launches investigation of heat-related deaths

Our reporter
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The US Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (USPS RFC) held a well-attended online meeting Sunday to announce the launch of an independent investigation into the deaths of two letter carriers who died in apparent heat-related incidents in recent weeks.

Dan Workman collapsed and died during his route in Grand Junction, Colorado. Jacob Taylor died amid extreme heat in Dallas, Texas. In spite of tracking systems designed to monitor postal workers’ movements, management failed to check on Workman until nearly two hours after he had gone unresponsive. Taylor is the second letter carrier to die in Dallas in just the past three years.

“These deaths, tragic in themselves, are part of a broader, ongoing crisis of heat-related injuries and fatalities affecting postal and delivery workers nationwide,” WSWS writer Tom Hall said in the opening report to the meeting. He cited data showing nine confirmed heat-related deaths of postal workers since 2012. Since 2015, OSHA has recorded at least 170 heat-related hospitalizations in the Postal Service, a figure it admits is vastly undercounted.

A critical factor is the lack of basic safety protections, including no air conditioning in USPS vehicles.

Hall said that this crisis is being exacerbated by the ongoing privatization drive, which the Trump administration has explicitly embraced. FedEx board member David Steiner is set to become Postmaster General in July. David Keeling, Trump’s pick to head OSHA, is a former safety executive for UPS and Amazon, both of which vehemently oppose new rules to protect workers from extreme heat.

Against this background, Hall explained, the official mechanisms for oversight and reform are deeply compromised, including both the federal safety apparatus and the union bureaucracy. The USPS RFC’s investigation, by contrast, would be a “worker-led inquiry, independent from official management or government bodies, designed to gather facts, testimonies, and evidence from those directly affected—the workers. This type of investigation is crucial when official investigations fail to fully uncover the truth or seek to protect the interests of employers and political authorities.”

The purpose of the investigation, Hall emphasized, would be to “expose conditions at USPS to the workers of the world and to arm postal workers with crucial information which they need to organize a fight.” It would be necessary not only to prevent such deaths from being swept under the rug, but also to “empower workers, through the building of a network of rank-and-file committees, to take control of safety conditions and line speed, abolish toothless joint labor-management safety committees and end the dictatorship of production for profit.”

Committee members pointed to the ongoing investigation into the death of Ronald Adams—a skilled tradesman who died in April at the Stellantis Dundee Engine Plant in Michigan—as a model for the kind of inquiry needed.

A wide-ranging discussion followed the opening report. A letter carrier from Pennsylvania described the death in Colorado as particularly appalling: “We have scanners on us. If we are stationary for too long, they use it for discipline, but … the carrier is sitting for hours and you don’t know that something’s wrong?”

“$15,000 is nothing compared to the loss of a life”

Referring to the death of Dallas letter carrier Eugene Gates in 2023, another postal worker added: “OSHA fined them $15,000. Which, to me, is nothing when [you are dealing] with the loss of a life.” She added that his widow “is still waiting to get his retirement.”

Workers sharply criticized the silence of the National Association of Letter Carriers. Of the NALC director of health and safety, one worker said, “we didn’t ever hear from that guy during COVID, and we’re not hearing from them now. I just checked the NALC website before I came on here. Not a word! Not a word about these two carriers losing their lives.”

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A worker reported that a colleague at another facility had told her that "They're turning the air conditioner off in the office to make them go quicker to get out onto the street," she said. "Another was suspended for job abandonment after going to the hospital for heart palpitations."

"The short staffing issues are ridiculous," she added. "It's so hard to get through your own route, and then have to trudge on and do two hours more of another route." Eight-hour routes are hard enough in the summer; chronic understaffing adds hours of forced overtime.

She pointed to the fact that under the so-called "Big Beautiful Bill," USPS would be forced to sell off thousands of new electric delivery trucks that include air conditioning. "Just because they don't want to use EV now," she said.

"Workers have got to use their voices," she said, concluding, "Through these rank-and-file committees, this is where workers can have a voice, can get solutions, and can get answers to these questions."

A postal worker from the New York area made an appeal for collective action. "The truth of the matter is, the only way this thing changes, with all the politics and rhetoric, is if we as carriers move to strike. We have to strike. Striking is our only option."

"We are driving these old LLVs (Long Life Vehicles) that are like ovens. When the sun hits an LLV, it's all metal, and it cooks you. That's why carriers are dying. It would be essential for us to get new electrical vehicles.

"If we don't, nothing will get done. It's up to us; we can't rely on our union. Our union sold us out 20 years ago. Time and time again, it has been shown that our union does not represent us; they represent the elites and corporations. Their best interest is with them, not with our needs as carriers."

"We have to go on strike, organize, set our demands, set the date, and just do it," he concluded.

A rural carrier who had been moved into a safety position described how USPS management pressured her to enforce unsafe conditions. "They literally told me that they own me. They said that I have to say and do what they tell me to do." That included telling other carriers "that it's not unsafe for them to be out after dark delivering mail in the winter, or during the seasons where it gets dark earlier. And that it's up to the carriers, or the employees to take care of themselves in the heat, and it is underlying health issues of their own, if they get sick or hurt."

"Every worker has a stake in this struggle."

The meeting also featured solidarity greetings from postal workers in other countries. Daniel, a member of the Canada Post Workers Rank-and-File Committee, said, "We are seeing a similar pattern unfold here in Canada." He described how the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) had sold out a national strike last year, after the federal government illegally ordered workers back on the job.

Now, "an Industrial Inquiry Commission was created to set the groundwork for the privatization of the Canada Post Corporation, which our union fully participated in throughout January and February." Management is pushing for "the elimination of so-called 'trapped time,' the closure of rural post offices, more part-time work, and in general, using AI and automation to make our days much more difficult," he said, "just as [is] being done in the US with the Delivering for America restructuring." The result, he warned, is that "workplace injuries and deaths will only increase. The issues that you are currently facing are systemic and widespread."

"We need an all-out fight to save the post office as a public service," he said. "Every worker has a stake in this struggle."

David, a member of the Royal Mail Rank-and-File Committee in Britain, also addressed the meeting.

Like USPS, Royal Mail vehicles have no air conditioning. "A heat wave by our standards is sweeping the UK at the moment. With temperatures in London forecast to reach 95 degrees Fahrenheit on Monday, that's tomorrow. Most of our vans are without air conditioning, and humidity is extreme. The safety measures agreed by the union, the Communication Workers Union, the CWU, and Royal Mail are just as toothless as yours."

Royal Mail workers, he said, are also tracked with surveillance technology, "We call [them] electronic whips." The CWU even allowed Royal Mail to make delivery workers wear heart monitors, he added. "In other words, to test how far they can push us before we collapse."

"In the summer of 2022, two colleagues collapsed and died," he continued. The CWU "colluded with Royal Mail to cover [it] up through an internal investigation designed to bury the truth." Now the CWU is collaborating with the Labour government to install billionaire Daniel Kretinsky as sole owner of Royal Mail.

"We expose this," David concluded. "Our role in the rank-and-file [committee], as our watchdog, is essential. To organize, to inform. And build resistance."

He emphasized that the fight by postal workers is international in character. "We are developing a common strategy, not just in words of solidarity. We are not involved in separate contract disputes, but engaged in an unfolding struggle against the rule of the oligarchy."

"We back this campaign, and we'll support extending it at Royal Mail [and] across borders, industries and continents."

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