

Another worker dies at Atlanta-area postal distribution center: Postal workers pay with their lives for ‘Delivering for America’

Jane Wise**24 September 2025**

On June 3, 2025, Eric Smith, a 59-year-old electronic technician with nearly thirty years of service with the United States Postal Service (USPS), collapsed while on duty at the Palmetto, Georgia Regional Processing and Distribution Center (RPDC). Smith was rushed to Piedmont Newnan Hospital but could not be saved.

Co-workers remembered Smith as friendly, kind and hard-working, a man who took pride in his decades of service as a USPS electronic technician. Outside of work, he loved motorcycle riding and was an active member of a local riding club. Beyond one local news item and a brief USPS condolence statement, there has been no follow-up reporting on the circumstances of his death, no medical examiner’s determination made public, and no comment from the postal unions beyond general expressions of sympathy.

The silence surrounding his passing, like that which followed the death of Shannon Barnes at the same facility less than a year earlier, highlights the indifference of USPS management, the federal government and the union bureaucracy to the lives of postal workers.

Barnes, 48, collapsed during her night shift on August 18, 2024. Doctors later told her family she had suffered a brain aneurysm. Co-workers said there was no cell service inside the building, forcing someone to run outside to call 911. By the time paramedics arrived, Barnes could not be saved. Her death should have been a wake-up call: a modern facility with no reliable way to summon emergency help is a disaster waiting to happen. Yet nearly a year later, the same vulnerabilities remained.

At roughly one million square feet, more than 17 football fields, the Palmetto RPDC is so vast that

walking from one end to the other can take several minutes. The floor is filled with conveyor belts, forklifts, and rolling containers. Workers report aisles blocked with mail containers and clutter, forcing detours that add precious minutes in an emergency.

The building’s concrete and steel construction blocks outside cell signals, leaving large portions of the work floor in a dead zone. Without repeaters or internal communication systems, employees have reported having to run outside to place 911 calls, a fatal delay when seconds matter.

The USPS Office of Inspector General (OIG) confirmed these hazards in its July 2025 progress report. Investigators “observed blocked aisles and cluttered work areas throughout the facility” and warned these conditions created safety hazards and slowed operations. They found broken equipment left unrepairs, spilled materials on the floor and damaged packages, including live animals in delayed shipments, sitting beyond their dispatch time.

About 20 percent of employees fail to report to work on a typical day, leaving skeleton crews to process mail backlogs under targets that assume full staffing. Those who do report are forced to work faster, thus increasing the risk of accidents. The OIG concluded management oversight was inadequate to ensure safe operations and that workplace culture remained poor more than a year after opening.

Similar and even more damning findings were made at the first RPDC in Richmond, Virginia. In its March 2024 audit, the OIG found many employees and supervisors had not been trained on new work processes or the state-of-the-art mail processing machines, leaving them unprepared to manage the

equipment safely.

The Palmetto RPDC opened in February 2024 as part of Delivering for America (DFA), the USPS's ten-year plan to "modernize" mail operations. DFA aims to consolidate hundreds of local processing centers into about sixty massive hubs. This program is a major step towards the decades-long goal of corporate America to convert the post office into a private entity.

Palmetto has become a choke point for all classes of mail collected in the area. Tractor-trailers have been documented waiting hours to unload, and the OIG warned that even one "adverse event" could gridlock the entire facility and ripple through the network. For workers, this means starting each shift facing piles of unprocessed mail, clearing jammed conveyors, and hauling heavy containers under relentless pressure to meet dispatch times.

A medical emergency like Smith's then becomes a test of a system already at its limits. Was there a delay in summoning medical help? Was emergency equipment up to date? Were enough trained staff on duty to respond? These questions remain unanswered by USPS management, the OIG, or OSHA. Until they are, workers remain at risk.

The Postal Regulatory Commission's January 2025 Advisory Opinion on DFA called the USPS's cost-savings projections "defective" and warned the plan could result in "months of degraded service performance" if implemented before facilities are ready. Postmaster General David Steiner, like his predecessor Louis DeJoy, has brushed these findings aside and continued the consolidation drive.

Eric Smith's death, and that of Shannon Barnes's before him, show the human price of this policy. These were not inevitable tragedies but predictable results of a system where safety, staffing and communication are subordinated to cost-cutting.

In a March statement, the USPS Rank-and-File Committee (RFC) warned that the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) and the National Postal Mail Handlers Union (NPMHU) have done nothing to stop the unsafe rollout of DFA.

Under DeJoy's plan, USPS signed an agreement with the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) to eliminate 10,000 jobs through early retirement, even as facilities like Palmetto were already dangerously short-staffed. "In the face of the deepest attacks in the

250-year history of the post office," the RFC wrote, "the union officials ... have not proposed, much less organized, a serious struggle." Rather than mobilizing resistance, the unions have partnered with management, leaving workers isolated as fatalities mount.

The deaths of Eric Smith and Shannon Barnes are part of a broader crisis facing workers across the country. From auto plants to foundries, warehouses to hospitals, the United States has become what the WSWS has called an "industrial slaughterhouse." According to the AFL-CIO, an average of 385 workers die every day from unsafe conditions or occupational disease.

The Postal Service is no exception. Under DFA, safety, staffing and communication are subordinated to cost-cutting. To prevent more deaths, workers must take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees should be built in every facility to document hazards, demand emergency communications and safe staffing levels, and coordinate with workers in other industries who face similar threats.



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