

Postal worker killed by mail sorting machine at Detroit area facility

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*On Sunday, November 16, at 3:00 p.m. US Eastern Time, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and the Socialist Equality Party (US) are holding an online public meeting to organize the fight against layoffs and hunger. **Register here to attend.***

A 36-year-old US Postal Service worker was killed at the Detroit Network Distribution Center (DNDC) in Allen Park, Michigan on Saturday, November 8. According to social media posts by his coworkers and friends, the worker was Nicholas (Nick) Acker of Trenton, Michigan.

Acker's fiancé, Stephanie Jaszcz, told a local news outlet that she went to the distribution center when he did not come home from work and waited three hours before getting any help.

Firefighters found the young worker's body stuck in a mail sorting machine. Authorities estimated he had been dead for six to eight hours before his body was found. No cause of death has been released as of this writing, but police have reported it as "accidental" and an investigation is ongoing.

"We want to know what happened and how long he was there," Jaszcz told WDIV. "That's what we want to know. We want to know how he even ended up there and why doesn't anybody know where he was at?"

Acker had expressed concerns to her about the way the facility was run, WDIV reported, adding that "current employees have expressed similar feelings" to the news outlet.

Acker was a mechanic at the postal facility who previously spent nine years in the US Air Force before working at the USPS. The two had just gotten engaged 10 days before his death and would have celebrated his 37th birthday in December. A memorial service will be held on Thursday and the funeral on Friday.

USPS released a statement indicating that the facility was up and running on Monday: "The United States Postal

Service is deeply saddened by the loss of our employee at the Detroit Network Distribution Center (NDC) in Allen Park, MI. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family. The NDC is fully operational, at this time."

Jaszcz was outraged by the statement, telling WDIV, "'The mail's still moving'? Gross. 'Sorry about the loss, but the mail's still moving.' They couldn't even say his name or acknowledge that he was an Air Force veteran. A man gone. A veteran. A husband. A human being. And all you can think of is mail keeps moving? Inhumane. It's gross."

The WSWs contacted the Detroit district office of American Postal Workers Union Local 295 for a statement, but, as of this writing, APWU officials have not replied to the phone message. The operations of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which has jurisdiction over the US Postal Service, have been curtailed by Trump's budget cuts and the government shutdown.

Little information is currently available on what happened, including if Acker was performing maintenance or mechanical repairs on the machine when he was killed. But many postal workers have raised questions about potential hazards from the Parcel Sorting Machine (PSM) and if a proper "lock-out/tag-out" system was in place at the Detroit area facility.

PSMs—many of which are outdated—are supposed to be disconnected from a power supply and subsequently locked out and tagged out to ensure the safety of workers doing maintenance or repairs on the equipment. Postal workers have said that to cut downtime and increase production, management often pressures workers to leave equipment unlocked to speed up the sorting process. This was one of the factors that contributed to the death of autoworker Ronald Adams, Sr. at the Stellantis Dundee Engine Complex in Michigan.

A leader of the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee in Pennsylvania told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "It is ridiculous that they had this person in the machine for eight hours. It's a failure of the supervisors. They are supposed to

know where their employees are. No one did a 'lock-out/tag-out' on the machine? It's almost the exact same thing as what happened to Ronald Adams. They are bypassing safety for production numbers. The same thing is happening with the carriers. Someone laid there outside for hours in the heat over the summer. They are tracking you, but it is for discipline, not for safety."

The pressure to bypass basic safety procedures is especially intense in the lead-up to and during the holiday season. Over the last several years, there have been widespread complaints about long delays, piling up and loss of mail at DNDC during the holiday season, largely due to understaffing issues caused by the pandemic, along with the increase in mail volume.

The complaints are nationwide. They are the product of the so-called Delivering for America program, a restructuring program aimed at automating jobs and consolidating local offices and routes to make USPS profitable, preparing for its eventual privatization. The program began under Trump's first term, but continued under Biden.

"This [DNDC] is a huge mail processing center with conveyor belts running above the workroom floor which was where he was working," one worker posted on social media. "Add to that, the constant machinery noise which makes it hard to hear. Essentially it's a factory with all the danger of moving machinery and equipment."

Just one week before Acker's death, a notice on the USPS site, titled "No piece of mail is worth a body part," urged workers to "be safe when operating equipment." It cited an incident at an unnamed postal facility where a postal worker's arm was caught and mangled in a conveyor belt at a reject mail chute.

"The employee was caught in the machine and could not reach the emergency stop button, which was eventually activated by a nearby co-worker," the statement says. "The employee was treated for bruising, swelling and numbness in the arm and fingers. The outcome could have been far worse, potentially including the loss of the arm. A later investigation identified serious safety issues, including the fact that the conveyor was not shut down or locked out before the employee attempted to clear mail from behind the moving parts machine guard."

While USPS management attempts to shift blame for such injuries to workers, the fact that this statement was posted just before Acker's death only underscores how prevalent such dangers are.

This is not the first fatality at the DNDC facility. In 2012, Steny Wing Hoi Yu, 55, was killed after falling approximately 10 feet from a fixed ladder while carrying a fire extinguisher in an attempt to fight a fire.

This year, two mail carriers have also died of heat-related

causes while on their routes. In 2023, after veteran carrier Eugene Gates died of heat stroke on the job, it emerged that he had just been written up for the first time in his career for a "stationary event." USPS uses an electronic tracking system called TIAREAP (Technology Integrated Alternate Route Evaluation and Adjustment Process) to monitor carriers' every movement and harass them into speedup.

"How many postal workers have died this year, because I feel like it has been more than usual," one postal worker commented on social media. Another responded, "This summer we had people passing away from the heat, not to mention death due to violent crimes, now we have this and the year isn't even over yet. Safety is out there but it really can't beat an admin work culture that just sees you as a number."

Reviews of the Allen Park DNDC, where the starting pay is under \$21 an hour, refer to the facility as "understaffed," "run like you're in prison," "six days a week with very little time off," "mandatory overtime so you are working a minimum of 10 hours," and "incompetent management."

A mail handler equipment operator posted: "DYSFUNCTIONAL, NO HOME LIFE, NO TIME FOR KIDS, NO TIME TO SLEEP, NO TIME TO EAT, AND NO TIME FOR YOURSELF! THAT IS ALL!! Pay is good if you work over-time. The money sometimes is not worth headache. The postal service is nothing like it used to be."

Workers must not allow Acker's death to be swept under the rug. Over the summer, the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee launched an inquiry into working conditions, 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." We urge workers to join the committee and submit information about conditions in their facility.



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