“Why are people dying?”: Postal worker speaks out on death of Nick Acker

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Many questions remain unanswered in the week since the death of Nick Acker, a 36-year-old maintenance mechanic at the Allen Park USPS Detroit Network Distribution Center (DNDC) on November 8. While no official cause of death has been released, his coworkers are continuing to speak out about what they know. Workers are demanding answers and an end to the constant pressure to keep the mail machines running at all cost.

Nick arrived at work around 11:00 p.m., but his body was apparently not recovered until 12:30 p.m. the following day. Firefighters told local media that he had been dead for six to eight hours before he was found. One of Nick’s coworkers, John, whose name has been changed to protect his identity, contacted the *World Socialist Web Site* with information on his death, confirming other reports from workers that the machinery that killed him should not have been running.

John said, “We’re really struggling right now. The culture is: numbers over everything. So we do have procedures put in place or should be put in place that we do to protect ourselves, but they’ve got us down to the bone in staffing. With so much pressure from the plant manager and other people above us for numbers, safety goes to the wayside.”

He described the relentless pressure applied to postal workers by higher-ups to keep the mail machines running and the disregard for basic safety measures to make that happen. “Even me, I have this internal dialogue like, ‘Oh, this is petty. I’m being petty by wanting to be safe here.’ And sure, 99 times out of 100, these situations we’re dealing with are pretty benign, but the thing is, safety should just be the culture. It should be just the way that we do things.”

“If you’ve got a problem with the machine or mail is stuck,” John said, “then you shut down the machine, you lock it out, you get your partner, you go up, you deal with it, you unlock the machine, you come down. But that’s all considered a pain in the ass because we’ve got this pressure to keep the plant moving, and that’s our job as mechanics. We keep the machines in orderly fashion. We repair them, and we clear any problems during operation. So it can be a real struggle, and sometimes there’s only two [maintenance mechanics] in a plant that I think is nearly one million square feet.”

“A few months ago, we got a new plant manager,” he continued. “When he took over, that’s when this culture really took a turn for the worse. It’s always been kind of shady in the safety department there, but not as bad as now.

“They wanted to run the plant as they were bringing Nick’s body down! They didn’t give anybody any time off. They’ve never had any conversations with us about it, about what they’re gonna do, how things are gonna be different, if we’re safe, or to reassure us. There’s been none of that. So it’s toxic there right now. It’s real bad.”

John recounted the 2012 death of Steny Wing Hoi Yu at the facility. “Before I worked there, a man was told to go up a ladder with a fire extinguisher. He fell backwards and hit his head, and it killed him. And the narrative with that death was that it was his fault. Nothing ever came of that. They tried to say it was an accident, but it was negligence.

“It is the same thing with Nick. It feels like negligence to me. Their first narrative that they tried was that he fell asleep. I’m telling you, he did not fall

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asleep. I suppose it is possible, and I guess we'll find out when the coroner releases their report, but I'm telling you, that's not how he died. The machine has defective safety issues. If the machine wasn't on, this would not have happened. There are safety things that should be on the machine that have been disabled or removed. I know that for a fact."

John wanted to speak directly to postal workers about the issues they are confronting. "Working at the Post Office is a really unique job," he said. "We don't have a CEO. We don't have stock shareholders. Our shareholders are the American people. I genuinely think that the Post Office feels that the American people want their mail at all costs, and I think that that is not correct. I think that the American people would rather have their mail tomorrow and have everybody safe.

"There's this toxic environment at the Post Office from these higher-ups because their pay is based on incentives. A plant manager gets a bonus based on production numbers and all these other factors. Postmasters, it's the same thing.

"For us workers, there is a devotion to making the mail go and getting the American people their packages. I don't do it for my boss. I don't do any of this for my boss or anybody that's above me. I do this for the American people, because I think that what we do as a service is super important, and it's time-tested and true throughout our history. I think it's really important, and most people feel that way who work here. But the higher-ups are always not gonna care about us.

"So the message I really want everybody to hear is: You're not gonna lose your job ever over being safe and taking care of yourself. Why are people dying? It's a very important job but nobody should be miserable at work. And nobody should die. Us postal workers across the country have to take care of ourselves and our coworkers at all costs, because nobody else is going to do it for us."

"I am so sick of this billionaire ruling class bullshit, and now we've got these little punk-asses making $150,000 a year thinking that they run the world," he said, referencing the higher pay rate given to plant managers and the Postmaster General's salary, which is actually over $500,000. "I'm so sick of it. They totally underestimate us workers. I can't stand what's going on right now. And [Nick's death] just feels like more of that. Late-stage capitalism at its finest," he concluded.

Workers attended a meeting of the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees (IWA-RFC) on Sunday afternoon to discuss a strategy to fight against unsafe working conditions, layoffs and hunger. Another postal worker from Pennsylvania joined the meeting and spoke on Nick's death, as well as the deaths of mail carriers due to lack of air conditioning in extreme heat.

Nick's horrific death is the product of a system that prioritizes profit over the lives and safety of workers. Workers around the world spoke on this at the IWA-RFC meeting and are beginning to draw the necessary conclusions.

The fight to uncover the truth about Nick's death and to prevent future tragedies requires the building of rank-and-file committees in every workplace, democratically controlled by workers themselves and independent of the union apparatus.

We urge postal workers, and workers in all industries, who want to share information, expose unsafe conditions and take up the fight to build rank-and-file committees to contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.

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