

“Our voices need to be heard”

Nick Acker’s coworkers speak out against unsafe conditions, APWU complicity in his death

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Postal workers: Fill out the form at the end of this article if you have information on the death of Nick Acker or other postal workers, or to get involved in the rank-and-file investigation into their deaths.

On November 8, postal worker Nick Acker was killed in a mail sorting machine at the Allen Park Detroit Network Distribution Center. Authorities estimated he had been dead for six to eight hours before his body was found.

Nick’s coworkers are speaking out about unsafe conditions inside the facility, as well as the fact that grievances were filed less than 90 days before Nick’s death. Workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) that the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) officials were aware of these grievances but did nothing to fix the problems that contributed to his death.

John, whose name has been changed to protect his identity, is encouraging other workers to come forward with what they know to prevent further needless deaths. Deaths are widespread in processing plants, as workers in Palmetto, Georgia and at other USPS locations throughout the country are reporting, following the death of Russell Scruggs, Jr. just one week after Nick died.

Nick’s death

John showed up to work and was informed by a coworker that the coroner was inside the building. He was told that Nick “went up to unjam a machine and even though it was supposed to be off, someone possibly turned it on while he was up there. They keep it idle while you’re unjamming,” which is not supposed to happen. “It’s a safety problem.”

He said that maintenance workers are supposed to have a spotter down below when they go up to remove packages from the machinery, but Nick was working alone. “What I have heard was that they turned that machine on, and the belt came out from under him, and he basically went into the machine.”

He described how there are mechanisms in place to protect workers that have been actively disabled to keep the mail running rather than shut machines down.

“There’s supposed to be a stop switch every couple feet that was disabled. The maintenance guys will tell you straight up that the only stop switch there, is on the ground, and there’s nothing up on top that’ll stop that machine. That’s where they’re supposed to have that extra person where you can radio down, but then they don’t even give you the extra

person anymore.

“There’s a button or sensor that is supposed to shut the machine down entirely if there’s a jam, but all the switches, all the boards have been taken out.” He also said that there are piles of boxes in front which make it impossible for workers to access the switches, and that fire exits are blocked.

The reason to keep the machine idling instead of turning it off is because “when we’re pushing stuff out quickly, the plant manager gets a higher bonus. When there’s issues, he doesn’t get a bonus.”

Grievances filed less than 90 days before Nick’s death; “absolutely nothing has changed”

John said that the machine that killed Nick is still running and that “absolutely nothing has changed” to fix the safety issues on it. “The employees say it’s weird to run that machine because of what happened. And they’re just like, ‘Run it up. We have to process this mail whether you like it or not.’” He said that maintenance workers were given expired hard hats to wear and are not allowed to bring their own, even if theirs are better than the ones given by USPS.

He said they had 90 days to fix the problems and that apparently Nick had filed grievances himself, but that management told them “it takes too much time to tag out to be able to fix it correctly, that they don’t have time for it, the mail needs to move at all costs. It doesn’t matter what the situation is. When they were retrieving Nick’s body, the plant manager was telling them to hurry up, we need this machine back running.”

He also said that the manager threatened to AWOL/LWOP all the workers who were sent home on the day that Nick died, and that if they left to attend the funeral last Friday they would be written up, which was confirmed by other employees in the facility last week.

APWU corruption and cover-up

John told the WSWS that workers have been concerned about corruption in the APWU for some time. “The union is terrible here,” he said. “They talk safety but don’t act on it at all.”

He said that the APWU “old regime” was ousted in local elections last

year and in an act of retaliation, outgoing officials destroyed files, smashed up computers, and got rid of years' worth of grievances. He said that some new officials have been "playing catch-up" with backlogged grievances ever since, but not in time to resolve the safety issues that cost Nick his life.

"All we get told is, 'We'll look into it, we'll see what we can do,'" when workers send in grievances, he alleged. "Our rep makes it seem like it's a big inconvenience when you bring safety to her. She just doesn't care. The people who get in these union positions, like the rep I'm talking about, she's friends with all the managers, she's friends with the supervisor that has had probably hundreds of grievances on her already, and that's why she still has the job. They're all buddies, and they don't want each other to get in trouble. They just throw grievances out, stuff just miraculously disappears."

He said the union is at fault in Nick's death. "As soon as it happened, there was a union guy right there that I've never seen before in my life, shaking our hand and saying, 'I got you brother.' But it's like, no, you don't. You take my money every week, but you don't represent me at all. You don't care." He also stated that their rep is absent and often has other people clock her in when she's not at the office.

He charged that a local secretary-treasurer was caught funneling dues money to her spouse, another local official, to use for home repairs. "There are guys who try to stand up against that kind of stuff, but they get punished," he said. "The thought of the union is a great thing. It was a great thing years ago, but now it's for people who don't wanna work and for management to get what they want from it.

"The union higher-ups are not for the actual working people anymore. And people are scared to stand up because they're afraid of retaliation. It's crazy. I just wanna go to work and do right by my family, but I have to fear coming in here that I'm gonna lose my life."

Widespread safety issues in the postal service

John said that other workers saw management attempting to clock Nick out when they found his body so that it would look like his death happened off-duty. "A similar thing happened with a girl out in Pontiac [Michigan]. The Pontiac facility is built on an old GM waste dump, and there's a ventilation system in the building. Well, somebody shut it off, a bunch of people got sick. She went out to her car to get her inhaler and she died in her car, and then they clocked her out," he said, referring to the death of 38-year-old Keesha Gray at the Pontiac USPS Metroplex in 2015.

"Our trucking system is dangerous. We will lock-out/tag-out trucks, and they just rip it up and throw it in the garbage and let the next driver get in it. You could lose a trailer going down the highway, and they just shrug their shoulders and say, 'It is what it is.' No, it isn't what it is—I don't feel like killing myself or somebody else! I've brought up multiple trucks and as soon as you turn your back, they throw the keys back in the box and throw the write-up out."

He claimed that the facility's fire suppression system was severely damaged last year—and has likely still not been fixed—causing flooding. Hi-lo drivers were told to move packages in the water in spite of the danger of being electrocuted. He also stated that workers get hurt when unlicensed contractors pull off the docks where there are little safety measures implemented.

Workers need to organize a fight back

"A lot of this stuff was hidden until what happened to Nick," he said of safety issues in the postal service, but that workers should not let his death be in vain and should come forward to expose the poor conditions and fight to make a change.

"Everything that should have been in place to stop it failed. That company failed him in making sure that he could go home to his fiancée, go home to his mom. He was someone's son. He's somebody's future husband, and they're making it like he's nothing. Something happens, and we just get kicked to the side, like we're just common street trash after years and years of service. I don't wanna see it happen anymore."

Many maintenance mechanics have been calling out of work in protest against the poor treatment by management following Nick's death, but they are beginning to get concerned about retaliation, he said.

"Everybody in there feels the same way. We're mad because we're not allowed to strike. If it takes two hours to fix a machine, that's worth somebody not getting killed over. The mail can sit for a couple extra minutes, but no, to management it don't matter, only these packages matter. And the union says, 'Just keep pushing and do your best, don't ruffle feathers.'

"But we have to stand up and fight, we have to cover each other. Whether you're in California or Georgia, we as fellow workers got your back. There's 600,000 of us, and there's only so many of them. They can't stop us all. If I gotta stand up and start something myself to push forward for this, I will, because I'm not gonna stand for watching people die anymore."

John also said that this is not limited to American postal workers. "Even though they're [Canadian postal workers] across the bridge, they're still brotherly to us. I wish I could stand up for all these other people. I couldn't imagine my life being gone and my family not having me because of an accident. It breaks my heart to see people getting hurt, losing their lives. What are they gonna really do to us? They can't fire everybody. Our voices need to be heard. Just like the autoworkers, when something happens with them, their voices are heard, and I'm tired of being silenced.

"I know that this sounds crazy, but I think that there needs to be some sort of conference where everybody, all workers, can stand up and say how they feel," he concluded.

Workers who want to organize a fight back should fill out the form below to get in touch.



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