

# Days after Nick Acker's death in mail sorting machine, Postmaster General pledges full steam ahead on restructuring of USPS Board of Governors

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*Postal workers, come forward with descriptions of the conditions at your plant by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.*

"We need to be more efficient," new Postmaster General David Steiner told a meeting of the USPS (United States Postal Service) Board of Governors on November 14. "We need to look at innovative methods to reduce costs and bring artificial intelligence into our logistics network."

But, Steiner boasted, "modernization" efforts "have already dramatically improved our middle mile operations to transform the postal service into a logistics powerhouse." The USPS has already cut 12 million man-hours this fiscal year and hopes to cut another 12 million in the next year.

He added: "Furthermore, the nine regional processing and distribution centers, 19 regional transfer hubs, 17 local processing centers, and 133 sorting and delivery centers ensure that we have the space needed to process volume and serve customers during peak season and year round."

Neither Steiner nor the Board members said anything about the November 8 death of Nick Acker at the Detroit Network Distribution Center (in fact, nobody at the meeting said anything about safety at all). Acker was killed by a mail sorting machine while performing maintenance, a machine which workers say had key safety features disabled. His body was not found for another eight hours.

The day after Steiner's report, another postal worker, Russell Scruggs, Jr., died at a Processing & Distribution Center in Palmetto, Georgia. Scruggs died after falling and hitting his head and bled out while management instructed his coworkers to get back to work. Critical delays in emergency services, made worse by the lack of cell phone coverage inside the building, were a major contributing factor.

"While we may change specific initiatives as we move forward, and our execution needs improvement," Steiner concluded, "I do not see the need for a fundamental reassessment of our processing and logistics modernization

strategies at this time."

This is the human cost of "modernization" at the United States Postal Service (USPS). At least five postal workers have died on the job so far this year, including two letter carriers who died over the summer due to heat-related causes. Scruggs was the fifth Palmetto worker to die in less than two years, including the deaths onsite of Eric Smith this June and of Shannon Barnes last year. Workers say two more workers have committed suicide.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is launching an investigation into these and other postal worker deaths. In a statement, the IWA-RFC explained an independent rank-and-file worker-led inquiry is necessary to keep management, the corporate media and the union bureaucracy from sweeping them under the rug. The inquiry will "arm workers with the knowledge they need to defend themselves and go on the offensive against the regime of corporate dictatorship in the workplaces, which makes these deaths inevitable," it explained.

The USPS is now in its fifth year of a massive restructuring effort, "Delivering for America" (DFA). As the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee explained two years ago, its purpose is to "transform the USPS from a public service, which used to pay decent wages and pensions, into an entity beholden to ... profits, with a super-exploited, Amazon-style workforce." This is being accomplished through the elimination of thousands of local post offices and delivery routes and the consolidation of the network into a smaller number of large, highly automated facilities requiring less labor.

The size of the roughly 600,000-strong workforce is being slashed, mainly through attrition. In his report, Steiner boasted of more than 10,000 buyouts so far this year and "modest" seasonal hiring of only 14,000 this year. Meanwhile, Steiner said, "daily package processing capacity [has increased] from 60 million to 88 million through the deployment of more than 600 package sorters, including 94 installed this year alone."

The American Postal Workers Union (APWU) issued only “Network of the Future,” carried out with the support of the Teamsters union) for last-mile delivery for less profitable routes. “We are also in talks with similarly situated companies for expanded last-mile service,” he said.

The muted statement in response to the November 14 meeting, “urging” Steiner to end DFA. Neither Steiner nor the APWU bureaucracy itself takes such statements seriously. The union, with over 220,000 active and retired members, has called only a handful of token protests over the past few years against DFA involving only a few dozen people. The National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) and the National Rural Letter Carriers Association (NRLCA) both explicitly *support* DFA. All three have forced through sellout contracts this year which have paved the way for more attacks.

Related to DFA are additional programs directed against postal carriers implemented with union approval. The new TIAREAP (Technology Integrated Alternate Route Evaluation and Adjustment Process) system uses electronic tracking to harass and impose speedup on city carriers. RRECS (Rural Route Evaluation Compensation System) has been used to cut pay for two-thirds of rural carriers, often by \$10,000 and even \$20,000 a year.

The program has had catastrophic results on mail delivery, including week-long delays of medical test results and other critical mail. The Palmetto facility, the first Regional Processing & Delivery Center opened under the new plan, has also been one of the worst offenders.

These delays have attracted media attention and grandstanding from members of Congress. The response to the deaths of Scruggs and Acker have been far more muted. While remaining silent on safety, Steiner proudly informed the Board last week that “service performance is steadily improving and we now regularly perform in the high 80s and even into the mid 90s for some of our products.

“Looking ahead to this current quarter,” he went on, “like the rest of the industry, we’re experiencing disruptions in our air transportation network due to the cargo flight tragedy in Louisville, the grounding of the MD11 planes and the increased cancellation of commercial flights.” The impact on deliveries of the Louisville air disaster, in which a UPS cargo plane killed 14 people after plowing into a dense industrial area, was the closest that Steiner came to the topic of safety.

DFA began under previous postmaster Louis DeJoy, who took office under Trump’s first term and continued under Biden. A major undeclared aim was to make USPS profitable to prepare for its eventual privatization. Indeed, DeJoy himself owns a company that contracts with USPS, and Steiner was until recently on the board of directors for FedEx.

But for now, Steiner appears to favor alternative approaches which amount to turning USPS over to private corporations without necessarily privatizing it. Identifying its legally-required service to every part of the country, Steiner emphasized that this is already being leveraged for deals in which USPS functions as last-mile delivery contractors for private logistics firms. In particular, he pointed to a deal with UPS (itself slashing tens of thousands of jobs under its

An existing deal with Amazon to deliver over a billion packages a year to rural areas shows the impact in practice. Rural postal workers have spoken out for years against dangerous levels of overwork, as well as illegal preferential treatment for Amazon packages as the rural network becomes overwhelmed.

Steiner also pointed to a similar “strategic partnership” with DHL, which merged decades ago with the German post office when it was privatized in the 1990s.

The integration of corporations with the government has been greatly accelerated under Trump. In addition to FedEx man Steiner, David Keeling, former “safety” head at UPS and Amazon, has been handed control of OSHA. Cuts to social programs have taken place with the direct involvement of billionaires like Elon Musk, and the oligarchs are regular visitors to the White House, soon to be hosted in the new opulent \$300 million ballroom.

Steiner also used the meeting to push for the removal of statutory requirements for USPS to invest its retirement and healthcare funds into safer but low-yield treasury securities, opening it up for investment into higher risk investments on the stock market. Steiner and the board members complained that this is a major drag on USPS finances because the yields are not enough to cover costs.

He stressed that this, combined with the removal of limits on raising debt, was needed to help raise capital for DFA. In addition to “modernization,” this would place USPS, which receives no federal funding and is entirely self-funded by postal revenues, even more at the mercy of Wall Street.

This underscores that the fight must be organized from below through new structures which workers control. The USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee, founded two years ago to fight Delivering for America, must be expanded into a network of local committees to share information, discuss strategy and plan joint actions. The defense of the post office must also be combined with a mobilization of the working class as a whole against inequality and oligarchy.



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