

# “You’re told don’t be a troublemaker”: New York postal worker speaks on deaths of Nick Acker and Russell Scruggs Jr.

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*The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees has called for an independent investigation, led by rank-and-file workers, into the recent deaths of US Postal Service workers Nick Acker, 36, in the Detroit area and Russell Scruggs, Jr., 44, near Atlanta. We urge postal workers to come forward with information about safety conditions at their facilities by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.*

*The World Socialist Web Site conducted the following interview with a New York City Postal Service worker on safety at her facility. Her name has been changed to “Kate” to protect her from retaliation by USPS and the postal worker unions.*

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Kate: I’ve been working in a post office for decades. I’ve worked in many areas and many facilities, and the environments were always unsafe. But it’s “don’t be the troublemaker.” That’s what you’re told if you bring attention to it—especially in the beginning, when I worked in pen-turn.

**WSWS: What is a pen-turn?**

Kate: Pen-turn is the lowest level where all the bags are. But back then, they had these ramps, where the mail would come into this large machinery, and dust would all over the place. The bags are made out of fabric, so they hold a lot of dust.

Now they are made of plastic, so they are easier to clean. Back then, we called them “number two bags.” They had these huge buckles. When you went to drop that mail, the buckle could cut you on the lower leg if you didn’t know how to do it right. So, you have to learn to hold the buckle and drop the bag correctly. But they don’t teach you that.

So, yeah, you don’t have the proper protective gear to work the mail. You don’t have the proper lighting or the manpower.

Also, those number two bags can be really, really heavy to pick up, so you have to ask for help, but then you’ve got to wait. And if you have to wait, you’re not doing your job; you’re delaying mail, which isn’t good—especially if you’re new.

When you first come in, you’re designated as an “unassigned regular,” and you do everything. They train you on the trucks, they train you in pen-turn, and they train you on the machines; they train you to box mail—you do everything when you’re a sub.

You’re a sub for three to five years before you become an “assigned regular,” and then you can pick your assignment.

But back then, I was at the bottom of the barrel, so I did everything, everywhere, and it was unsafe everywhere. Even to this day, you walk in here, you’ll find unsafe conditions.

**WSWS: Russell Scruggs, Jr., the worker who died in Palmetto had only been on the job for three weeks. He was a mail handler assistant. He fell, hit his head, and bled to death. Would he have been trained to do what he was doing when he fell?**

Kate: When I came in, the mail handlers had to do a weight test. That was the only test the mail handlers had to do. They had to be able to handle a certain weight capacity and to pull or push equipment.

As far as safety procedures? When you’re working in any area, whether it’s the first time or the hundredth time, you’re never told what the proper safety procedure is—never. They put you to work with their most reliable employee, and that employee basically trains you on all the shortcuts they’ve incorporated to get the job done faster. There are no proper safety protocols.

**WSWS: So there is no standard operating procedure. Do you feel it’s the same today?**

Kate: Yeah, because we don’t have enough people. Just recently, they came in and abolished all the inside [non-carrier] job assignments, then reposted the jobs they wanted us to pick from. So, whoever doesn’t have enough seniority to get the assignment they want goes back to the bottom of the barrel. It doesn’t matter how many years you had—you are now considered an unassigned regular.

They just did this to us two weeks ago. The union stepped in and this time we got our assignments back.

**WSWS: Nick Acker was a maintenance mechanic who was killed in a mail sorting machine at a distribution center outside of Detroit. Workers filed a grievance with the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) on that machine 90 days before the accident. But nothing was done and the machine was left on idle and never shut down.**

Kate: I worked the machines in our building. On the second floor, I worked on the DBCS (Delivery Bar Code Sorter). That machine was very, very fast, and handled a lot more mail. It was never turned off. It’s always on idle because the supervisor didn’t want to see that light red. The light red means the machine is off.

He would ask: “Why is my machine off? I need numbers. You turn my machine off, I don’t get our numbers.” They just want numbers.

**WSWS: How did they clean up the machine?**

Kate: On our breaks, when we left. Any problems we had with it, we

were not allowed to turn the machine off. We had to go get the supervisor, and then the supervisor will decide whether it was worthy of turning off—and THEN maintenance gets called.

**WSWS: Would any of those be because something has become a safety hazard? Give us an example of something they saw as worthy of turning the machine off.**

When the mail isn't reading, and you're getting all the mail going directly to the reject bin because there's dust or a piece of paper blocking one of the eyes.

But if one of us stops it, that stop counts as a negative on our paperwork. We have to keep loading the machine while your partner goes and gets the supervisor. The supervisor makes an assessment, then we get maintenance, and then we stop the machine. Meanwhile, all that mail is running through that machine to the reject bin.

**WSWS: Have you ever witnessed any fatalities or injuries on the machines you were working on?**

Kate: No. But I had a sad experience working in meter breakup, which is where all the stamps get canceled, so they aren't reusable.

I was working with what they call an OG, one of the old gentlemen who were training the young people who were coming in. One day, he tells me, "Okay, I'm gonna go take my break, you take care of the front." I had to wait for the trucks to arrive to take the trays of mail off. After a while, I started thinking, "he's been gone a long time. I mean, the OGs get a longer break than the newbies, and they would always go back and sit on the skids and sometimes take a nap because a lot of them had a second job. But this was an exceptionally long time. So I asked the guy I always saw him talking to about it and asked what I should do, and he told me, "Don't worry about it, just go do whatever you're supposed to be doing."

So I went back to work. And by the time they went back and checked on him, they found he was dead, lying on the skids, from a heart attack. And the most upsetting thing for me was when the supervisor said, "Take him off the clock." That's the first thing she said. They don't want to pay a dead man.

That was early in my career, maybe six, seven years in.

So, I haven't personally seen any deaths machine-wise. But safety-wise, a major issue would be the temperature in the buildings. They don't give heat. Air conditioners that weren't working in the summer. The windows don't work. When I worked in Midtown, the windows didn't open. That's a safety hazard. The windows should open. The air conditioning is only on in half of the building, so they give you water. They donate water so you can work under these terrible conditions.

**WSWS: So, they "donate" water?**

Kate: Yeah, they did. They brought in cases of water, and it wasn't even cold, and not Poland Springs either; it was a lower level. Yeah, the most hazardous thing is the temperature. None of the equipment works properly if it's too hot or too cold.

Equipment like post cons, the skids, they're not cleaned properly. They all have canvas on them, and they're all filthy.

And the weather is brutal on workers, too. You are so cold that you're wearing gloves and your street jacket while working. And then they want to tell you you can't put a [space] heater on because you need an extension cord, and that extension cord isn't safe. Okay, true, but working when it's 30 degrees inside the building is safe? And you're slowing down because you can't move. It's frustrating. And when it's hot, you're sweating, you're uncomfortable.

**WSWS: Every place you've been in with mail sorting machines has had no heat in the winter?**

Kate: Every single station I've been to has had some issue with the temperature, seasonally; every place is never comfortable to work in. "You can't expect to be comfortable like you're home." That's what they tell you. "You're at work, okay?" But it shouldn't be this cold at work, you know? I'm saying I feel like I'm standing outside, you know? But don't be the troublemaker. Don't be the person who says, "That doesn't look right, that's broken."

And there are never enough people—there are never enough people to do the job.

**WSWS: Jonathan Smith, the APWU national president, sent a letter saying he was sorry about the death of Nick Acker and "You know our goal is zero deaths on the job." But then, he said, we're in favor of an investigation conducted by USPS and OSHA...**

Kate: But what happens is that every time safety, OSHA, or anyone is going to come, management gets alerted, so the floors and the machines get cleaned. Everything is the way it's supposed to be. So when OSHA investigates, it appears that there's no major issue.

OSHA should pop in when it's 19 degrees outside—randomly walk into a station and ask "What is the temperature in here? How is this safe when you have people working who are sick?"

Now, if I come to work sick, my coworkers get upset because I'm making them sick. But if I'm too sick to go in, I get penalized by management. "But you know, we're short, we need you!" But, think about it, if I'm sick and I come to work, I make [other people] sick. So now you have more people sick!

**WSWS: The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is urging postal workers to form committees inside the postal facilities that are going to make sure that conditions are safe. You know, one of the things that US Postmaster General David Steiner said was that the deficit for the last fiscal year is \$9 billion. We're going to be self-sufficient and continue "Delivering for America" with no reassessment, he said.**

Kate: I read that email. I don't know, morale is so important, and people don't care. How you feel about your job and about coming to work affects your productivity.

And then you have union [reps] that will come and tell you, "Okay, listen, take the write-up. After six months, we're gonna have it expunged from your record. Because management wants it, management thinks it will make the other "children" behave.

Asked about an independent inquiry into the deaths of Acker and Scruggs, she said, "I support that. We have to get the truth."

*Fill out the form below to send information on conditions at your facility. Your identity will remain confidential.*



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