

USPS worker fell into coma, was denied workers' comp and fired after inhaling dust at Georgia distribution facility

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The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) 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 at the end of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

The USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee has launched an investigation into widespread safety issues, injuries and deaths at the United States Postal Service. The investigation was launched in response to the deaths last November of Nick Acker at a distribution center near Detroit and Russell Scruggs, Jr. near Atlanta.

A USPS worker in Duluth, Georgia, has now contacted the rank-and-file committee about a horrific ongoing experience at the North Metro Processing & Distribution Center. She says she suffered serious health issues while working during a construction project at her facility. After falling into a coma due to breathing dust and other particles, she was denied workers' compensation. Management ignored her physician's restrictions and then fired her.

The worker's name has been changed to Alice to protect her identity. The following interview has been edited for clarity.

WSWS: How long did you work for the USPS?

Alice: I started in 2000. I'm a processing clerk.

WSWS: When did this construction project begin?

Alice: The beginning of 2024. First, it started off in one section of the building. But I was under the impression that they were coming to do some work over on the office side, because they cleared out everybody in the office side, on the HR side. We didn't know that they were coming to the workroom floor.

A lot of the people in the HR on the office side got to work from home during the construction work. And I thought that was bull, because we can't work from home, they didn't give us an option.

WSWS: What were conditions like before the construction project started?

Alice: It was a hostile work environment. In the past, I've had issues with management over here in Duluth. One of the managers I had put paperwork on is the same manager that would retaliate against me after my hospitalization. The very same one that did not honor my doctor's statement.

It's always been a hostile work environment, caused by the maintenance management staff. I never had issues with any people, coworkers in the building. It's always been, for me, maintenance management. They use their position to bully people. During construction, they said, "You got to come to work. You don't come to work, then after missing so many days, that's a write up. Then after that you get suspended." I'm not the only

one in there that has underlying health issues that shouldn't have been in that type of environment.

WSWS: Tell us what happened.

The United States Postal Service in its entirety neglected to provide us with a safe work environment. I held my end up, as far as my contract goes—showing up for work, doing my duties, things of that nature. They were supposed to provide me with a safe work environment, and they didn't.

At the time, my last week of being in the building before I went home, I had complained to my manager, saying I'm having a hard time breathing in here. It's hot and muggy in here. I keep coughing. I asked if it was okay if I leave work early tonight, and he said yes. He also added that the chiller wasn't working. The chiller is part of the air ventilation system.

With the chiller not working, it's hot and muggy in there. You can't breathe, so that causes respiratory issues. It's the summertime, and we're in there with no air conditioner running, and we just have to deal with it. If someone was in a stationary job, such as a clerk, or even the mail handlers, they would bring fans to work to try to stay cool. There were times they would have [the air conditioning units] running, but all that was coming out of it was hot air. So we're in a building where there's no windows or anything, and we're inhaling all of these particles released by construction.

When construction was happening in the summer, it was hot and unbearable. People couldn't breathe. It was like dancing with the devil, sweating and everything, to the point where when people were on their lunch breaks and their 15-minute breaks, everybody was running outside. They were either sitting outside or running to their vehicles and turning on the AC, or running to the store to get big jugs of water and big cups of ice.

We went to one supervisor to ask them, "Hey, are we supposed to be over here in this area while [the construction workers] were ripping down this big, old tubing?" The supervisor said, "Oh, yeah, it's fine." We asked, "Are you sure? It seems like we would be in their way." They took down this huge tubing in the ceiling, which I later found out was part of the ventilation system, and when they ripped it down everything was covered with dust and other stuff.

WSWS: No PPE [personal protective equipment] or face masks were given out?

Alice: You remember the masks that the surgeons used to use, the thin blue ones? There was a point in time, very brief, that they started passing those out during the construction work, but they ran out and people were not able to get masks.

Those were inappropriate masks to wear because of the type of construction work that was taking place in there. The mask we should have been wearing is the N95.

I ordered better masks when I first started noticing my coughing, I was

coughing uncontrollably, but by that time, it was too late, the stuff had already got in my lungs.

In April 2024, I was hospitalized for 10 days and the doctor couldn't figure out what was going on. Could it be the construction work? He didn't think anything of it, because at that time, I hadn't showed him pictures of my workplace. But he gave me a restrictions letter, that I can't be around construction work, dust, dirt, debris.

My manager didn't care about that. I believe that was retaliation because I had put pen and paper on him in the past for creating a hostile work environment, an EEO [Equal Employment Opportunity] complaint. And so when I mentioned to him, "Hey, I'm on restrictions from a physician, I can't be out there," he ignored that and didn't care.

The union was aware, and [the union rep's] advice to me was, "Follow the last instructions of your supervisor." I said, but I'm on restrictions, but I did so, following [the union rep's] instructions.

But I was hospitalized a second time. I went into a coma and had to be rushed into surgery. I was in the hospital for over three months, and then in rehab.

I had to learn how to walk and talk again. I had two nurses and a physical therapist coming out to my house for a total of 12 weeks. That was because insurance wouldn't cover it any more.

I was diagnosed with PTSD, depression. That whole situation traumatized me.

When I came out of my coma and was able to walk and talk, they brought me my phone up there, and I showed my doctor the pictures when he came to visit me in the hospital. He said, "Oh my God, I am so sorry." When he saw those pictures, that man was almost in tears, because he knew what I had just went through. I almost died.

He felt bad, he felt responsible in the sense that had he known that the construction work was of that magnitude, he would never have let me go back in that building. But I had assured him. I said, this is USPS' fault, not yours. I was diagnosed with COPD [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease], and from the doctor's statement that I got from my physician, he said that the work environment played a role in me getting injured.

WSWS: *Did you have any underlying health conditions before the construction project started?*

Alice: That I was aware of, no.

WSWS: *What about your coworkers? Was their health impacted as well during construction?*

Alice: I don't know, honestly, because people don't walk around broadcasting their medical history. But I will say, myself and a few other people had noticed that the building was getting emptier and emptier. People were missing. We don't know if they quit, resigned, transferred out, or were they sitting at home while the construction work was taking place. I don't know.

There was one lady, one of my coworkers, a custodian. She was having breathing issues. She has asthma, and she also kept coughing. She went to her doctor because she couldn't figure out why she couldn't stop coughing. She made her doctor aware of what was taking place in there. She told me that her doctor gave her a restriction letter, telling her to take rest and get fresh air and use your asthma pump when needed. Not in those words, but along those lines.

People needed money, their backs were up against the wall, they had bills and didn't have enough sick leave or annual leave or whatever to take off that time if they needed it. My coworker would still come to work, wear a mask, do her job, and she would take her breaks outside in her car with the windows down, getting fresh air.

WSWS: *Tell us what happened next.*

Alice: When I was comatose, my aunt and my mom's family flew out here on a red-eye. They came straight to the hospital, and when they got there, my aunt says she met with the same manager that didn't honor my doctor's statement. She gave him documentation from the hospital.

Now, what the hospital did was, they filled out some FMLA [Family and Medical Leave Act] papers. And on that documentation, it clearly states, "In critical condition, return to work is yet to be determined." I have all the paperwork in a folder that was given to my aunt. She took the FMLA paper and gave it to the manager. Later on, I found out that USPS never received that paperwork.

I've been out from work since June of last year. I was approved to go back to work, but with restrictions. I said, how can I come to work if I'm in the state I am? That's impossible. And there's still construction work taking place in there, and my doctor note clearly says that I can't be around that type of environment.

You would have thought they'd have said, "No, you can't come in this building, but we could send you to a station where there isn't any construction." No, they didn't do that.

But I have witnessed them accommodate two other pregnant custodians when they shouldn't have been in the building at all. They assigned them to desk duty.

I put in for workers' compensation twice and was denied each time. Now, I'm currently looking for an attorney that can help get my wages and medical coverage taken care of. I have \$61,000 in bills.

All the attorneys that I have spoken to have said "Yes, you have a case." But when you say the United States Postal Service, it's like a forbidden rule, you can't sue them. Everybody's scared of the post office. Why? "They have a team of lawyers," they say. Okay, that's fine, but we have proof that they were in the wrong.

Then, on the 15th of August last year, management called and verbally terminated me for failure to report to work.

They didn't care. They verbally fired me over the phone, and I laughed at it, because I never received any paperwork. I never received a letter of removal or anything like that. So when I reached out to my last supervisor and asked about documentation, because I'm trying to file unemployment, he said "You're not fired." I said, "What does letter of removal mean?" He responded, "oh, uh ... Yeah, letter of removal means terminated."

I'm currently looking for another job.

WSWS: *Were you given an explanation as to why your workers' compensation requests were denied?*

Alice: From what I read online, they're telling me that I didn't submit more sufficient medical documentation. But my lung doctor made it simple, black and white, "Due to the construction work, it is my belief ..." He typed up this letter, you guys asked for this, and he gave it to me. I went in there and picked it up. We gave you what you were asking for. I even submitted pictures of me lying in a coma.

WSWS: *What about the union reps? Were they given any knowledge about the construction project? Did they give any updates to the members about it or assist?*

Alice: I don't remember. I don't know what the union knew was or was aware of. But I can tell you they're useless as hell, because how do I get terminated for failure to report to work if I'm on oxygen, on a concentrating machine 24/7?

The union [American Postal Workers Union, APWU] isn't worth two cents to a nickel. The rep is useless. They're in bed with management, because there's no way I should have gotten written up, fired or anything else if I'm sitting at home and in a hospital and in a rehabilitation center due to a work-related injury.

People don't want to speak up because they are scared that they will get fired. We were trained and threatened that we couldn't talk to you guys, the news people. If we talk to you guys, the news outlet, we get fired.

Denied workers' compensation and fired

They made us sign off paperwork on that. I don't care. This is one of those situations where I don't give a damn about this job. They almost killed me, almost took my life.

They try to cover up things, they try to turn a blind eye. No, I'm speaking up. What are they going to do, fire me? They already did, and I'm a person that's living with a disability [COPD].

WSWS: *You recently attended a meeting of the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee to discuss how to bring forward its investigation into unsafe conditions. What did you think about the meeting?*

Alice: It's a meeting that needed to be had. That meeting you guys had the other day was very, very important because it not only was myself that endured unsafe work environments, it was other employees as well that have witnessed or have experienced it hands on.

The meeting needs to be had again. Everybody should have been on that call to hear in different locations, there's this situation here, the same situation there.

WSWS: *Any final remarks?*

Alice: I feel like the workers' comp is for the employer, they're not for the employees. Given my situation and my proof, they didn't back me up in this situation. Who do we turn to in a situation like this? Who can I find to help me fight this case that I have? That's taken resources, that's taken up my time, my money, and it's unfair. They failed to provide us with safe working environments.

The post office neglects their workers. They don't provide us with safe working equipment, and the training they give these so-called managers and supervisors is useless.

I'm quite sure I'm not the only one going through this, having to deal with the post office and situation like this and not having proper representation.

We need to stand on their backs about this, step on their toes, make them feel the wrath. They treat people terribly, and all we're trying to do is come to work and provide for our families.



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