

APWU webinar on post office closures diverts workers into appeals to Congress, corporate America

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On Sunday, June 14, the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee is holding an online public meeting: “Four workers dead at Palmetto—the consequence of decades of cuts and the drive to privatize USPS.” Register for the event here.

The American Postal Workers Union (APWU) held its latest webinar last Wednesday under the headline, “Don’t Let Them Close Your Post Offices!” Led by APWU President Jonathan Smith, Executive Vice President Debby Szeredy and several local officers, the livestream tried to divert workers from a genuine struggle against closures into the dead end of appeals to businesses, Congress and regulatory agencies. No questions were taken from the floor.

On May 8, Postmaster General David Steiner, a former CEO of Waste Management and former board member of FedEx, proposed the most sweeping service cuts in the history of the United States Postal Service (USPS). He called on Congress to remove the mandates requiring six-day delivery, uniform pricing and the operation of “unprofitable” post offices—over 70 percent of them, by USPS’s own measure. The proposal amounts to the abolition of the United States Postal Service as a public service and the preparation of its privatization.

The webinar was also held only days after the death of Demarcus Little on June 3 at the Palmetto Regional Processing and Distribution Center in Georgia, the fourth worker to die at the facility in two years. His name did not pass the lips of any of the speakers. In contrast, the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee, formed by workers in opposition to the pro-corporate bureaucrats, is deepening its independent inquiry into safety at Palmetto and other facilities nationwide.

Rejection of class struggle

In his remarks, Smith declared: “We let working class people lead the fight ... energize, mobilize, organize, unionize! We have the power!” Szeredy struck the same note: “The only way we’re going to do it is utilizing people power.”

And yet every appeal was directed away from the working class: to the courts, to the Postal Regulatory Commission, to Congress, to corporate America. The APWU’s 200,000 members are being directed to the very same forces that are driving the destruction of the post office.

Debby Szeredy urged workers to knock on doors, hand out pink cards and call their congressmen. But these methods failed even to save her own facility, the Mid-Hudson PDC, which was one of the first to go under the Delivering for America (DFA) restructuring program. While she has been APWU vice president, 564 post offices were permanently closed last year alone.

Rainey Ramirez, legislative director for her local and California State APWU, urged workers to contact their representatives: “They want to be asked.” James Stevenson, National Business Agent (NBA), Central Region, described the union’s strategy in Michigan as “We didn’t limit the input from Republicans or Democrats; we enlisted the aid of all of them,” citing several by name.

The APWU presents the arsonist as the fire department. Congress created the entire crisis over a half century, from the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970 that first imposed the requirement that the post office be self-funding, effectively operating as a business.

There is broad bipartisan support for the cuts. When Steiner testified before the House Oversight Subcommittee on Government Operations in March that USPS could run out of money by next year, Republican chair Pete Sessions and Democratic ranking member Kweisi Mfume jointly demanded reductions. Now, there are growing calls for legislation to codify the destruction of universal service in one form or another by imposing sweeping cuts.

Stevenson described the business community as “highly, highly influential,” urging a collaborative effort between union leadership, residents and business owners. This is class collaboration in its most explicit form. Workers are told their natural allies are the local capitalists, not the working class. In particular, the “business community” of downtown Detroit was cited—a “community” which has spent decades destroying

countless good-paying autoworker jobs.

Stevenson argued: “A service-provided organization can’t shrink itself into prosperity.” Under the banner of “prosperity,” he dissolves the interests of workers into the interests of management. If “prosperity” means USPS generating more in revenue than expenditures—running like a business—then USPS absolutely *can* shrink itself into prosperity. That is the whole reason management is doing it. Stevenson treats it as a baffling mistake rather than a class policy flowing from a definite logic.

If “prosperity” means providing prompt, affordable, high-quality service to every American, then of course the cuts mean disaster. But the whole question, which they slur over, is: Which of these two incompatible goals, based on different class interests, will win?

That will only be decided through a determined, independent struggle by postal workers, with the support of workers all over the world facing the same attacks.

This is only the latest APWU webinar this year aimed at heading off rank-and-file opposition. In April, Smith held a livestream in which he dismissed Steiner’s warning that the USPS could run out of cash within a year as “salacious” and exaggerated, insisting there was no crisis, merely a “situation.” He told workers that “victory is only a phone call away” and berated them for not calling Congress: “Any reason that you give me is an excuse.”

In an earlier safety webinar, following the deaths of Nick Acker in Allen Park, Michigan and Russell Scruggs at Palmetto, Georgia, Smith did not mention either victim by name. Instead, he denounced workers for speaking out anonymously—an implicit attack on workers providing anonymous testimony to the Rank-and-File Committee’s safety inquiry—demanding they “put your name on the form. Stand up and be counted.” This is a call for workers to put targets on their backs. Coworkers of Demarcus Little have told reporters they want to speak but fear being fired.

The union bureaucracy functions as an agent of management and the state. The postal unions enforce no-strike laws and binding arbitration. The NALC (National Association of Letter Carriers) and NRLCA (National Rural Letter Carriers Association) have openly supported Delivering for America, which has eliminated thousands of routes for their own members, while signing side agreements allowing invasive electronic monitoring and massive pay cuts. The APWU’s role has been to organize a housebroken “opposition” that channels anger into forms management can safely ignore.

The scripted Q&A, with no questions from the floor, expressed the bureaucracy’s fear of its own members. No worker could be allowed to challenge the APWU’s “strategy,” to raise Palmetto or the death of Demarcus Little, or to demand strikes, safety actions or the unity of city and rural carriers.

The rank-and-file alternative

But workers are increasingly in no mood to accept this stonewalling. Workers at Palmetto are demanding an investigation; across the country, postal workers are looking for a fight. The key question is how this fight can be organized in opposition to not only management, but the pro-management union bureaucrats.

The USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee is seeking to prepare the ground for such a fight, uniting workers across facilities and crafts and uniting with workers across the country and the world. The committee is part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), linking postal workers in the US, Britain, Canada, Germany and Australia who are also facing huge corporate attacks.

The committee’s independent safety inquiry has documented conditions at Palmetto that the bureaucracy has refused to organize a fight against.

In its June 11 statement, the committee advanced a program that addresses the scale of the attack: no privatization, no service cuts, no post office closures, six-day delivery to every address, an end to Delivering for America, restoration of pension contributions, inflation-busting wage increases, an end to two-tier pay and an end to TIAREAP and RRECS.

“What we are advocating is not a petition campaign or a phone-banking drive,” the committee declared. “Rather, it is the development of a fighting organization, controlled democratically by workers themselves, campaigning to mobilize workers against the cuts and the entire framework behind it.”

The APWU webinar was not a plan to fight closures. It was a policing operation—an attempt to channel growing rank-and-file anger into safe, fragmented, powerless forms, precisely when workers are beginning to organize independently. The toolkits and petitions are shackles on workers to ensure the national restructuring proceeds unimpeded. The USPS Rank-and-File Committee fights the whole restructuring, with the whole workforce. Postal workers who want to fight back should join the committee and attend the public meeting this Sunday, June 14.



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