

# USPS workers discuss 4 deaths at Palmetto facility, privatization drive in public meeting

Our reporters

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The USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee held an online public meeting Sunday on the deaths at the Palmetto, Georgia Regional Processing and Distribution Center. Participants discussed the broader safety crisis throughout the U.S. Postal Service, ongoing restructuring and privatization efforts and the need for workers to organize independently of the union apparatus.

The meeting brought together postal workers from across the United States as well as rank-and-file representatives from Britain and Canada. Speakers reviewed the circumstances surrounding the four deaths at the Palmetto facility, examined the implications of Postmaster General David Steiner's restructuring plans, and discussed the common experiences of postal workers internationally as governments and corporations seek to slash costs and expand private control over mail delivery.

The discussion took place in the wake of the death of Demarcus Little, the fourth worker to die at Palmetto in two years. Opening the meeting, David Harrison, a writer for the *World Socialist Web Site*, said the attack on USPS was "not just an attack on our jobs, wages and pensions" but "an attack on a 250-year-old public institution that serves every home in America."

Tom Hall, another WSWs writer, gave the opening report. "We're meeting under urgent and tragic circumstances," he said. "Four workers have died in two years at the Palmetto Regional Processing and Distribution Center in Georgia." He named Shannon Barnes, Eric Smith, Russell Scruggs Jr. and Demarcus Little, saying their names "must not be buried in incident reports or forgotten after a brief statement of condolence."

Hall said management presented each death "as an isolated tragedy," but the deaths were "part of a national safety crisis produced by cuts, speedup, understaffing, restructuring and the subordination of workers' lives to budgets and corporate interests." Reports from workers and evidence gathered by the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee, he said, had

pointed to delays in calling 911 because of blocked cell phone signals, inadequate first aid supplies and training, EMS access problems and reports that Palmetto had operated without proper written safety protocols.

The report then reviewed the broader restructuring of USPS. Postmaster General David Steiner, Hall said, "has warned that USPS is running out of cash." But "the issue is not simply accounting." The cash crisis was being used to demand "sweeping changes," including "ending or weakening six-day delivery, closing unprofitable post offices, cutting jobs, reducing services and undermining the universal service obligation."

Hall explained that the universal service obligation means that the USPS "exists to provide service to every community, household and address, regardless of whether Wall Street considers the route profitable." The cost-cutting "Delivering for America" (DFA) scheme had already reorganized facilities, cut jobs, consolidated routes and changed service standards, he said. USPS was also being pushed toward "the role of a last-mile delivery contractor for private logistics corporations," including through the recent DHL deal and Amazon deliveries in rural areas.

He said the postal unions had "done nothing to organize effective resistance." The union bureaucracy "tells workers to call Congress" and "treats the problem as a lobbying issue, not a struggle by workers." He concluded that "workers in every facility need committees controlled by workers themselves" to document unsafe conditions, expose cover-ups and "prepare the ground for collective action."

The discussion opened with George MacDonald of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee in Britain. "Here in the UK, we can tell you what the future holds after your postal service is privatized," he said. Since Royal Mail's privatization in 2013, "the Royal Mail service has been collapsing," he said, with "20,000 fewer workers" while private investors made billions in profits.

MacDonald said the Communication Workers Union had imposed a sellout agreement that attacked conditions and "introduced a two-tier workforce." New hires were

employed on inferior pay and conditions, while long-serving workers had been “driven out in their thousands” through “impossible workloads, injury and stress.” He warned that a new delivery model, backed by the CWU, was based on “three delivery workers doing the work of four.”

“Worker-led inquiries are essential to uncover the truth,” MacDonald said. “This is the only way to end a cover-up by management and union officials. It must be connected to the broader struggle against cost-cutting and privatization.”

Daniel Berkley, a rural mail carrier with Canada Post and a member of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee in Canada, said the meeting was “critically bringing together postal workers across the United States, Canada, and as far as the UK.” For too long, he said, “our struggles have been isolated from each other.”

Berkley said the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) had announced ratification of five-year contracts negotiated “behind our backs in closed-door meetings for over two years.” This paved the way for “Phase 1 of the restructuring of the Canada Post Corporation.” Under the plans, “door-to-door delivery will be completely phased out over five years,” and the workforce reduced “by as much as two-thirds, or down to 15,000 workers over 10 years.

“We must organize and fight back,” Berkley said, “but we cannot do so while hamstrung by the CUPW apparatus.” Workers, he said, should “break with the bureaucracy, join the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committees and establish branches at every postal depot across the country.”

Asked what American workers should take from Canada’s experience, Berkley said, “Privatization is coming to the United States.” Its implications were “terrible for the working class, not just postal workers,” he said. Remaining jobs would be “brutally intensified with surveillance” and “ever increasing targets.”

The meeting then heard a statement from a worker at the Springfield, Massachusetts facility, where workers have formed a rank-and-file committee. The worker said employees were exposed to “insect infestations, rodent activity,” excessive indoor temperatures and inadequate air conditioning because of Legionella bacteria. The statement said there were “no defibrillators in a workplace that employs over 1,000 people,” and that many areas had “little or no cell phone service.”

Turning back to Palmetto, a postal safety worker said that “all facilities are supposed to have OSHA written programs,” but “as of six months ago, the Palmetto plant did not have any OSHA written programs” covering emergency action plans. She also said workers were being threatened with firing if they spoke to the media. “If management catches wind of it,” she said, “they will be let go.”

An anonymous Palmetto worker spoke briefly about

conditions inside. “No job is worth losing your life,” the worker said. “As I speak today,” the worker added, “brand new emergency phone boxes sit empty with no phones in them.”

The worker said cell phone service remained blocked in parts of the building, especially the center and back. “I want to know why OSHA wasn’t called,” the worker said. “Why is there no investigation? And why is the union still silent?”

Another worker raised the need for postal workers to discuss how to use their collective power. “Withholding our labor is still, I believe, the most powerful weapon that we all have,” he said. Even before “a big industrial action,” he said, if “20, 25, 30 percent” of workers began acting together, it would have “a huge, huge impact on management.”

A city letter carrier said US workers were being subjected to “the same union tactics as Canada and the UK.” With the NALC contract expired, she said, workers had “no transparency,” while union officials met behind closed doors. “We can see what is happening in Canada and the UK, and it’s not pretty,” she said. “That is why these rank-and-file committees are so, so, so important.”

In closing remarks, Hall said the discussion with workers from other countries showed what was being planned for USPS “was already taking place in Canada and Britain.” The meeting concluded by urging workers to submit testimony, expose unsafe conditions and join the fight to build rank-and-file committees. “The time for sitting on the sidelines is over,” Hall said.



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