

USPS worker twice exposed to acid at Arizona mega-facility

Max Jones
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USPS workers, provide testimony to the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Safety Inquiry by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept confidential. For more information about the inquiry, click here.

A former United States Postal Service electronics technician says he was exposed twice to muriatic acid at USPS' massive Avondale, Arizona processing hub, according to reporting last week by the *Arizona Republic*.

Jeffrey Holliday, a 60-year-old Chandler, Arizona resident, quit his job in April after his second exposure to the hazardous chemical, which spilled from packages broken open by the Matrix East/West Sorter (MEWS)—a multi-platform behemoth that processes 50,000 packages per hour and spans nearly three football fields.

The machine began running in May 2025 as part of the “Delivering for America” (DFA) restructuring plan, which aims to consolidate the post office’s operations into a smaller number of Amazon-style hubs. In addition to the program’s impact on jobs, it is associated with a safety disaster for postal workers.

Holliday’s first exposure occurred on March 27, when a package of muriatic acid—a corrosive form of hydrogen chloride commonly used in swimming pools—burst open on the MEWS. “I was right over the acid spill when I got a couple of lungfuls of it,” Holliday told the *Arizona Republic*. “Your lungs are on fire. It feels like someone’s holding a lighter on the inside of your lungs. You can’t catch your breath.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, hydrogen chloride in high concentrations can lead to throat swelling, spasm and suffocation. Holliday was treated at an urgent care facility on March 29, receiving a chest X-ray, breathing treatment and prescriptions for prednisone and albuterol. More than a month later, he still suffered from tremors in his right hand and persistent headaches.

Then, on April 24, it happened again. Another package of muriatic acid burst open on the MEWS during his shift. That day, he quit. “I chose to keep what little I got left in my health over a paycheck,” he said. “I just can’t take any more of the stuff.”

A machine without safety protocols

The MEWS was launched last summer with great fanfare. USPS gave local media a tour in August 2025, presenting the machine as the future of mail processing. The Avondale facility serves as the hub for 70 percent of the mail and packages heading west to California, according to USPS.

But Jason Juday, a postal worker since 1988, told the *Arizona Republic* the machine operated for months without an emergency action plan or a lockout/tagout plan—a basic safety procedure required to ensure machinery cannot inadvertently start up while technicians work on it.

The consequences of management ignoring lockout/tagout procedures can quickly turn deadly. It played a direct role in the April 2025 death of autoworker Ronald Adams Sr. in southeast Michigan.

The lockout/tagout plan was not posted until December 19, 2025, a full four months after the machine was unveiled to the media. The emergency action plan came even later. USPS spokesperson Sherry Patterson confirmed it “was completed in March 2026,” after the first acid spill on March 27.

“It’s a half-baked machine in a half-baked facility run by half-baked leadership,” Juday told the *Arizona Republic*. “The machine does not handle the type of mail that it was intended to process, the facility seems to be not up to par for what is being processed there, and the leadership does not seem to be what I expected.”

Juday reported seeing petroleum lubricants, food substances, paint, vinegar and powders burst open on the sorter. During an average shift, he personally witnesses 6 to 12 parcels become unwrapped or burst. The machine runs at 320 feet per minute, and some packages tumble until they rupture, potentially coating other mail with hazardous materials.

A complaint about safety and health hazards at the Avondale facility was filed with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) on August 21, 2025.

The Department of Labor declined to conduct an inspection, instead giving USPS supervisors a week to investigate and report back before closing the complaint on September 21, 2025. In effect, the agency allowed the corporation to police itself.

Regarding the danger, Holliday told the *Arizona Republic*, “As long as that machine is there, it’s going to keep breaking boxes open and exposing workers to chemical spills. It’s just a hazardous, dangerous work environment.” The machine itself reflects the drive to maximize output regardless of the human cost.

The human cost of “modernization”

The Avondale acid exposures are the predictable product of a restructuring program that subordinates safety, staffing and worker health to speed and cost-cutting.

Since the DFA consolidation began, workers have been dying across the USPS network. At the Palmetto Regional Processing and Distribution Center in Georgia, which is another DFA mega-hub, four workers have died in the past two years: Sharon Barnes, 48, who suffered a brain aneurysm on the night shift in August 2024 with no cell service inside the building to call 911; Eric Smith, 59, a 30-year technician who collapsed on duty in June 2025; Russell Scruggs Jr., 44, a mail handler assistant who fell and hit his head in November 2025; and most recently Demarcus Little, a 45-year-old father of two.

In November 2025, maintenance mechanic Nick Acker was crushed to death inside a mail sorting machine at the Detroit Network Distribution Center in Allen Park, Michigan. Workers reported that safety features had been disabled and a grievance had been filed with the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) less than 90 days before Acker was killed. OSHA ultimately fined USPS just \$26,481, a figure equivalent to roughly 10 seconds of USPS revenue.

It was these back-to-back deaths—Acker and Scruggs within a single week—that prompted the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee to launch an independent investigation into safety conditions across the postal network. As the committee declared at the time, management, OSHA and the union bureaucracy had all failed to protect workers, and “the only way we will see justice is if we reveal the truth, hold accountable those responsible for the conditions that put us in harm’s way, and set up our own shop floor organizations to take control.”

Testimony from workers at Palmetto and other facilities has documented the absence of safety protocols, lack of on-site medical resources, blocked cell signals preventing emergency calls, delays in directing first responders and failures to follow lockout/tagout procedures. These are not isolated lapses but standard conditions under DFA.

In Illinois, Keywan Glenn died of cardiac arrest at a Forest Park facility, and Christopher Montano, 46, collapsed in the parking lot of his Lake Forest annex in December 2025. In New York, Lucy Diaz died on the job at Manhattan’s Morgan Processing Center in November 2025. Neither management nor the unions have acknowledged the death.

At the Avondale facility, the push for speed over safety is explicit. “It’s all about the numbers. Keeping the numbers up, million boxes a day, million items a day. That’s what they want. And they’ll keep that up at any cost,” Holliday said.

The betrayal of the unions

Throughout this assault, the postal unions such as the American Postal Workers Union (APWU), the National Postal Mail Handlers Union (NPMHU) and the National Rural Letter Carriers’ Association (NRLCA) have functioned as partners in the restructuring. They have signed below-inflation contracts, endorsed binding arbitration to strip workers of the right to vote on their own agreements and remained silent as the death toll mounted.

At the Avondale facility, where 550 workers are employed, the unions have offered no organized resistance to the MEWS’s hazardous operation. When Holliday was exposed to acid, when Juday documented the absence of basic safety protocols, when OSHA was invited to look the other way—the union bureaucracy was nowhere to be found.

This is a conscious policy of class collaboration. The union apparatus is integrated into the management structure, and its function is to contain and suppress the independent mobilization of workers.

The way forward

The USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee, founded in late 2023, has been conducting an independent investigation into the deaths and safety conditions across the postal network. At a June 15 meeting, postal workers from the US, Britain and Canada reviewed the Palmetto deaths, Steiner’s restructuring plans and the international assault on public postal systems.

Avondale workers should join and build this committee. They should submit testimony documenting the acid exposures, the lockout/tagout plan that arrived four months late, and the emergency action plan completed only after workers had already been injured. They should form their own local rank-and-file committee, controlled democratically by workers themselves, independent of the APWU apparatus that has been silent while 550 workers were sent into a facility with no safety protocols.

Safety cannot be achieved within the logic of profit. It requires the independent mobilization of the working class, organized through rank-and-file committees that break with the union bureaucracy and link the fight for safe conditions to the fight for socialism.



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