Minnesota postal worker wins hostile environment case after APWU union abandons him: “They took it all”

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Postal workers: provide testimony to the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee’s inquiry into workplace safety! Fill out the form below; all submissions will be kept confidential.

Steven Linell Smith, a black maintenance mechanic formerly employed at the United States Postal Service’s St. Paul Processing and Distribution Center in Eagan, Minnesota, endured five years of racial harassment, stalking, threats and management retaliation before being fired on a pretext.

In 2025, after a five-day jury trial, Smith won a federal hostile work environment case against USPS. He documented 32 incidents between September 2017 and March 2022, including repeated racial slurs, physical threats, stalking of himself and his wife, false police reports and a death threat left on his toolbox.

But Smith remains out of his job. The American Postal Workers Union, which told him his case was “unwinnable,” refused to fight for him over the racial harassment that defined his years at the facility. After Smith won in court, local APWU President Dave Cook sent him a personal letter telling him he would have to sue the union to get his job back.

“They took it all,” Smith told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “They took the 401k, retirement benefits, everything.” Smith, who had worked his way up from a $12.50-an-hour custodial position to a Level 9 maintenance mechanic earning $37.50 an hour, now works as a driver. “This is just a job,” he said.

Smith had closed his own business in 2013 to focus on his career at USPS. He is still trying to get reinstated to recover his retirement. “I still have 15 years to work,” he said.

Smith’s case happened as postal workers nationwide are enduring rapidly worsening conditions, including injuries and deaths. Four workers have died in two years at the Palmetto Regional Processing and Distribution Center in Georgia; Nick Acker was crushed to death inside a mail-sorting machine at the Allen Park facility in Michigan; and workers in Springfield, Massachusetts have reported asbestos, Legionnaires’ disease, injuries, contract violations and union inaction.

These conditions are being investigated independently by the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee because management, the postal unions and government regulators have ignored workers’ warnings and covered up the scale of the crisis.

In an interview with the WSWS, Smith argued that his case was not isolated but part of a pattern of abuse of postal workers by management. “Louis DeJoy, that’s who gave me all the problems at the post office,” Smith said, referring to the previous Postmaster General.

Smith described incidents faced by other workers at the facility. A coworker previously hurt his back at the plant. Management moved him to a different position, then told him to toss mail or go home. “He went to the hospital from the post office,” Smith said.

Five years of harassment

During the period documented by Smith, one employee called Smith racial slurs on several occasions and followed him and his wife around making animal and circus noises at the plant. On one documented occasion, Smith described her following him home: “she followed me and my wife home and sat in her car outside my house.”

The employee filed false reports against Smith and his wife, blocked their vehicle in the parking lot, and called the police with a false report. Multiple coworkers described her as having “targeted” and “stalked” the Smiths.

Despite management being aware of her behavior, and despite her decade-long history of such conduct, she received only a seven-day suspension. The suspension was not for racial harassment, but for following them and taking pictures.

“She had a whole file in the back, there was no way they were not aware of her. Yet they let her keep on doing it!”

Another employee called Smith a racial slur and tried to start a physical fight after Smith asked him to pull up his mask to protect himself and other workers from the spread of COVID. The employee was suspended, but once again not for racial harassment.

The lack of disciplinary action over these incidents led ultimately to a death threat left on Smith’s toolbox: “Caution: Dead Laker’s N***** Storage Ahead.”

Management investigated, but the investigation was effectively shut down after the investigating agent gave the erroneous legal advice that a biracial person could not racially harass a black person. No corrective action was taken. Management simply told everyone to “get along.”

Management’s complicity

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The harassment persisted for five years because management refused to treat it as racial harassment. “And yes, management was part of targeting me too,” Smith told the WSWS.

When Smith returned to work after his first firing, management assured him things would change. “They told me after I returned from my first firing that there would be a zero tolerance for any type of harassment and that they would take care of it and that they did not accept any name-calling, is how they put it,” Smith said.

But the harassment continued. The promises were empty.

USPS tried to claim it could not take further action without violating the collective bargaining agreement. The court rejected this, noting USPS “cannot contract its way out of its statutory obligation to remedy a racially hostile workplace.”

The APWU refuses to fight

As the harassment continued, Smith turned to the American Postal Workers Union. The union refused to fight for him.

When Smith sought assistance from the APWU, Dave Cook, president of the APWU in Eagan, sarcastically asked him, “What are those civil rights that are being violated?”

“I felt like I was getting no help from the union,” Smith said. “The union told me that my case was too hard to fight for, so they would not file arbitration.”

The union told Smith his case was “unwinnable,” but he won it in federal court after a five-day jury trial. The union also refused to file for arbitration on the hostile environment and discrimination claims. Smith’s first removal was reduced to a 14-day suspension through the grievance process, but the union would not pursue the racial harassment claims that were the core of his case.

It fought lesser procedural grievances while abandoning Smith’s civil rights, directly protecting management.

The firing

Smith was terminated twice: first in May 2021, the same day the U.S. Attorney’s Office received notice of his lawsuit; then in March 2022 for a “one-click lunch”—clocking out for an unpaid break and back in almost immediately, a practice workers resort to under the pressure of understaffing and speed-up.

Smith explained how management targeted him. “We do that all the time, and management knows! Ninety-five other workers did a one-click lunch on the same day I was fired. Four were fired; three of those got their jobs back through [the APWU].” Smith alone was denied union representation.

“They didn’t pull me into the office to warn me or anything,” Smith told the WSWS. “They just fired me automatically. … then the union refused to get my job back”

The circumstances point to selective enforcement as a pretext against a worker who had taken legal action against USPS.

After Smith prevailed in court, Cook sent him a personal letter saying he would have to sue the union to get his job back. They told Smith “the post office doesn’t want you back,” speaking for management.

After the trial, Smith reached out to the Attorney General’s office, Keith Ellison, Tina Smith, Amy Klobuchar and the NAACP. None of them helped.

“I went to everyone else,” Smith said when asked what made him reach out to the WSWS.

During the years of harassment, the lawsuit and the aftermath, Smith had several family members pass away, and his daughter graduated from college, but he could not give her the support he wanted to.

USPS restructuring and the conditions for abuse

Smith’s case developed as Washington and Postmaster General David Steiner are preparing the largest cuts in postal history. Denouncing high quality, universal service as “unaffordable,” management is using a cash flow crisis to propose sweeping cuts, including local post office closures and ending six-days-a-week delivery. It has already suspended payments into workers’ pension plans.

Meanwhile, a restructuring program called Delivering for America is being used to cut labor costs by consolidating facilities and automating operations. USPS’s own reports boast that management eliminated 44 million annual work hours in three years and saved $2.3 billion through “more efficient, more automated facilities.”

This is the environment in which harassment, intimidation and selective enforcement flourish.

While the APWU has postured as an opponent of certain Delivering for America measures, it has limited workers to token protests, appeals to Congress and procedural grievances. It has not mobilized postal workers against the restructuring of USPS, the assault on working conditions or the victimization of workers like Smith.

Smith’s case shows in concrete terms what this means. When confronted with years of racial harassment, threats and retaliation, the union apparatus left him isolated.

Postal workers should support Smith’s fight for reinstatement and the restoration of his retirement and benefits. To prevent other workers from being isolated in the same way, workers should build the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee in every facility, giving themselves the means to expose harassment and threats, demand action against management retaliation, defend victimized coworkers and organize collectively against the unsafe and abusive conditions being imposed throughout USPS.

While speaking with the WSWS, Smith said: “I can’t give up … if I give up, who will take care of my family?”

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