

USPS maintenance technician removed from Minnesota facility for demanding cleanup of human feces

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On June 20, Alex Azevedo, a maintenance technician at the U.S. Postal Service's St. Paul Processing and Distribution Center in Eagan, Minnesota, was escorted off the property by police and referred for a psychiatric evaluation. Management ordered the evaluation after he became distraught over its refusal for more than 24 hours to clean up human feces that had been smeared across mail-sorting equipment.

The incident exposes the systematic degradation of working conditions across the USPS under the "Delivering for America" (DFA) restructuring plan. Facility consolidations, staffing cuts and the elimination of millions of work hours have intensified the pressure to keep equipment operating despite dangerous conditions. Four workers have died in two years at the Palmetto Regional Processing and Distribution Center in Georgia, where an independent inquiry by the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee has documented reports of inadequate safety protocols and emergency medical resources.

Azevedo's removal also follows a documented pattern of harassment and retaliation at the St. Paul facility. Steven Linell Smith, a maintenance mechanic at the plant, endured five years of racial harassment, stalking, death threats and management retaliation before being fired on a pretext. He won a federal hostile work environment case against the USPS, while the American Postal Workers Union (APWU), which had declared his case "unwinnable," refused to fight for his reinstatement.

Azevedo, an electronic technician, spoke to the WSWs about what happened on June 19 and 20. Nearly three weeks later, he remains on leave with no expected return date.

"I smelled the odor of feces in multiple locations"

Azevedo first detected the odor on the evening of June 19 while troubleshooting a machine crash on the Automated Flat Sorting Machine (AFSM #2).

"A lead clerk had discovered feces on the floor and between two mail tubs in the area between two sorting machines," Azevedo said. "I had been clearing a conveyor jam in that same area moments earlier, so I immediately became concerned that I might

have handled contaminated equipment."

Approaching the tubs, he encountered what he described as a "strong feces odor" and could see "a dark substance through the side of the tub." He notified his supervisor, Mark S., by radio.

Shortly afterward, one of the machines suffered a mechanical failure. "While I was troubleshooting it, I smelled the odor of feces in multiple locations far from where I first discovered it," Azevedo said. "I concluded that contaminated tubs had been inducted onto the sorting equipment, spreading fecal matter through the system."

He radioed Mark S. again. According to Azevedo, the supervisor replied that the odor was "probably still in the air" and that the area needed time to "air out." The supervisor's alternative proposal was to send someone to help Azevedo "work faster so I would not have to smell it."

Another electronic technician arrived for his shift and independently confirmed the odor. A third maintenance worker also reported smelling feces in the area. A clerk offered Azevedo a mask. Despite these multiple confirmations, the machine was returned to service after repairs were completed. No decontamination was performed.

The other technician raised the issue at the shift's stand-up meeting, stating that he shared Azevedo's health and safety concerns and raising the possibility of contacting OSHA and removing the machine from service. Mark S. responded that the previous night's handling of the situation had been "an operations decision" and that he had personally inspected the area and "felt no further action was needed."

"They decided to instead call the police"

When Azevedo arrived for his next shift on June 20, he found the equipment still reeking.

"I then located [the plant manager and maintenance supervisor] nearby and asked [the plant manager] to inspect the area," Azevedo said. "While I was walking to the machine, I explained that I had discovered feces the night before and that I could still smell the odor inside the equipment."

According to Azevedo, the plant manager approached the area

and visibly reacted to the stench but offered no corrective measures. Instead, he asked Azevedo what he thought should be done.

“I took this as an insult,” Azevedo said. Determining how to address a biohazard in postal equipment “is not my responsibility as an electronic technician, but instead would fall under his responsibility.

“I then became emotional and removed myself from the floor. As I was walking away [the plant manager] ran to catch up to me and told me that I would have to be medically evaluated before returning to work.”

Azevedo recounted what happened next. “At first they were going to call an ambulance for me, and I told them ‘good, send one so they can see this health hazard we are working in’ and after I said that, they decided to instead call the police and have me escorted off of the property.”

Only then did management finally act. A different maintenance supervisor oversaw a technician and a custodian clean the equipment. The system was not returned to operation until roughly 10:30 p.m., some 30 hours after the contamination was first discovered.

OSHA asks USPS to investigate itself

Following the incident, Azevedo filed a complaint with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). On June 29, the agency’s Eau Claire Area Office sent a letter to USPS summarizing two allegations from his complaint: that suspected feces had not been cleaned from the sorting equipment for more than 24 hours after it was identified, and that workers were given no hazard training before being tasked with the cleanup.

OSHA did not initially conduct an inspection. Instead, it asked USPS to “immediately investigate the alleged conditions” and report back by July 7. The letter, signed by Adam Fechhelm for Area Director Ruth Wright, stated: “We do not intend to conduct an inspection at this time.” It remains unclear whether USPS submitted a response or what that response said.

OSHA thus left the initial investigation in the hands of the management that had allowed the hazard to persist for more than a day.

The union’s response

In seeking support, Azevedo contacted a steward with Local 65 of the American Postal Workers Union (APWU). He was told the union would meet on his case but that the steward “can’t guarantee it won’t go to the next step,” an apparent reference to termination. Management has since sent Azevedo a letter demanding he obtain a return-to-work clearance, indicating he remains barred from the facility following the psychiatric referral.

The union’s posture is familiar to workers at the St. Paul facility. On June 24, the WSWS published an extensive interview with Steven Linell Smith, a black maintenance mechanic at the same plant who endured five years of racial harassment, stalking, death threats and management retaliation before being fired on a pretext. Smith won a federal hostile work environment case against the USPS, but the APWU—which told him his case was “unwinnable”—refused to fight for his reinstatement.

After Smith prevailed in court, APWU Local 65 President Dave Cook sent him a personal letter telling him he would have to sue the union to get his job back.

Reinstate Azevedo! Investigate unsafe conditions at USPS!

Nearly three weeks after his removal, Azevedo remains barred from the facility with no expected return date. USPS has not explained why his demand that management address a biohazard became grounds for a psychiatric referral. The outcome of management’s response to OSHA remains unknown, while Local 65 has given Azevedo no assurance that it will oppose further disciplinary action or secure his return to work.

Alex Azevedo must be returned to work without loss of pay or benefits. USPS must release its response to OSHA and provide a full accounting of why the contaminated equipment remained in operation, why workers assigned to clean it allegedly received no hazard training, and why management used the police and psychiatric apparatus against the worker who demanded action.

An investigation controlled by rank-and-file workers is needed to expose unsafe conditions and defend victimized coworkers. The USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee’s inquiry into the four deaths at Palmetto demonstrates the importance of workers collecting testimony and making their findings public. Postal workers should build the committee in every facility and organize collectively against management’s assault on jobs and working conditions.



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