

American Postal Workers Union convention offers no fight against historic USPS cuts

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The American Postal Workers Union held its 28th Biennial National Convention in Los Angeles last month as the US Postal Service prepares the deepest cuts in its history. Despite repeated declarations that postal workers face an existential threat, the convention proposed no meaningful action to stop the attack.

Postmaster General David Steiner has set the period after the New Year as the starting point for major measures if Congress does not act. He has threatened changes to service standards, higher prices and the closure of “thousands of unprofitable post offices.” A July Inspector General white paper compiling possible measures to close USPS’s financial gap included an option for a 10 percent workforce reduction, fewer delivery days and reductions in universal service.

The attack also extends directly to the November elections. Trump has sought to use the Postal Service to restrict mail-in voting, part of a broader drive to overturn longstanding democratic norms and place the conduct of elections under greater federal control. In August, USPS issued rules requiring states to provide lists of mail-ballot recipients and use unique barcodes on ballot envelopes, with the Postal Service empowered to reject ballots that do not comply. A federal judge temporarily blocked the rules on August 28, but the Trump administration is appealing the decision as states prepare to begin mailing ballots.

On the opening day of the APWU convention, the USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee published a statement calling for committees in every workplace, uniting clerks, city and rural carriers, mail handlers and other crafts, and preparation for collective action, including a national strike, to stop layoffs and service cuts. A rebellion of this kind—postal workers taking control of the struggle themselves and breaking through the divisions imposed by the union apparatus—is precisely what Smith and the other union officials are working to prevent.

The postal union bureaucracies have suppressed opposition to the restructuring of USPS for years. The National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) supported major elements of the earlier Delivering for America restructuring plan, while the National Rural Letter Carriers Association defended key elements of it and warned against reversing its initiatives

wholesale. NALC and the National Postal Mail Handlers Union are both moving to send contracts into binding arbitration, preparing the ground for the cuts to begin.

The National Rural Letter Carriers Association (NRLCA) also held its convention this month. The union has helped impose the Rural Route Evaluated Compensation System (RRECS), which grew out of a 2012 interest arbitration award and has cut the annual pay of some rural carriers by thousands and even tens of thousands of dollars.

APWU has taken a somewhat different tack from openly declared collaboration, instead posturing as an opponent of closures and service cuts while refusing to organize action capable of stopping them. The APWU held rallies at more than 90 locations on July 28, generally drawing crowds numbering only in the dozens. One of the principal demonstrations in New York attracted about 50 people.

Smith, who succeeded Mark Dimondstein last year, made the Great Postal Strike of 1970 a central theme of his first State of the Union address as APWU president. He recalled that his grandfather had participated in the strike and declared that APWU was “the union built by workers who went on strike because they refused to accept poverty wages, unsafe working conditions, or second-class treatment.”

Later he told delegates: “There are powerful people in this country who want to see the Postal Service fail. There are powerful people who want to see the APWU disappear, and they have the power to decide our future. ... The struggle requires a movement, a movement that our union must lead.”

The repeated references to 1970 inverted the relationship between the union officials and the rank and file. The walkout began as a wildcat strike in defiance of union executives and a federal strike ban, spreading until roughly 200,000 postal workers had shut down much of the national mail system. The Nixon administration failed to break the strike after sending more than 23,000 military personnel into New York as strikebreakers.

Once the bureaucracy regained control, it ended the strike and channeled the movement into negotiations with the government. Within months, the unions reached agreement with the Nixon administration on the framework that became the Postal Reorganization Act. Since then, the bureaucracy has

helped management carry out cuts by acting as enforcers of anti-democratic strike laws and enforcing binding arbitration.

Far from reviving the traditions of the 1970 strike and building an independent movement of the working class, the APWU is seeking to channel workers into the dead end of writing to Congress and campaigning for Democrats. Immediately after calling for a “movement,” Smith told delegates, “Congress just has to get off of their ass and act.”

Democratic Representative Jimmy Gomez of California delivered the opening-day keynote, presenting himself as an ally of postal workers and reviewing his record in Congress on USPS and labor legislation.

In fact, both parties in Congress support the cuts. At a House hearing on USPS in March, ranking Democrat Kweisi Mfume declared that the Postal Service “obviously needs to cut costs and increase revenue.” At a Senate hearing in June, ranking Democrat Gary Peters likewise began from the need to stabilize USPS’s “bottom line.”

At the convention, Smith went on to call for an increase to USPS’ debt ceiling, wider investment authority for postal pension funds and the reassignment of tens of billions of dollars in Civil Service Retirement System liabilities. These same three financial measures are also being proposed by Postmaster General Steiner and jointly promoted by the other postal unions.

While Smith repeatedly called USPS “a service and not a business,” neither he nor the union officialdom in general have raised the ending of the self-funding requirement, first imposed in the 1970 Postal Reorganization Act, which has been the basis for its operating as a business and the framework for decades of cuts. For almost 200 years prior to this, the Post Office was subsidized by the government as a matter of course. Its founding in 1775, with Benjamin Franklin as the first Postmaster General, was a major achievement of the American Revolution, and its purpose was to encourage an informed and engaged citizenry.

AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler addressed delegates on the third day. Her speech focused heavily on union growth, electoral politics and the introduction of artificial intelligence and automation. COPA (Committee on Political Action) captains also worked the convention floor soliciting contributions to APWU’s political action fund so that, as the union put it, APWU could make its voice heard “on Capitol Hill.”

Shuler devoted substantial attention to the attack on mail-in voting. “Vote by mail is going to be absolutely essential to making sure our voices are heard,” she told postal workers.

The defense of mail voting and democratic rights is an urgent issue, as Trump is seeking to place the distribution of mail ballots under federal control, require states to submit voter lists and standardized ballot materials, and empower USPS to withhold ballots from voters or states deemed noncompliant with his administration’s rules.

But American democracy is rotting on its feet precisely because of the domination of the country by a capitalist oligarchy. This is why democratic rights can only be defended through an independent movement of the working class against the oligarchy and the state apparatus it dominates.

The AFL-CIO bureaucracy works deliberately to prevent the emergence of such a movement, subordinating workers instead to the Democratic Party, Congress and the electoral process.

The appearance of American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) President Everett Kelley was even more revealing. The federal workforce has already undergone an assault of the dimensions now being prepared at USPS. It has shrunk by more than 270,000 since Trump returned to office through layoffs, reductions in force, deferred resignations, retirements and hiring restrictions, while executive orders stripped more than a million federal employees of collective bargaining rights.

But AFGE has organized no industrial action to halt this offensive, relying instead on lawsuits, rallies and appeals to Congress.

Kelley brought the same program to the APWU convention. “Our rights to belong to a union are on the ballot. Our right to health care is on the ballot,” he told delegates. He urged postal workers to respond to the attacks through voter registration and turnout in November—under conditions in which the post office itself is being brought into a conspiracy to sabotage the elections!

Under conditions of the deepest attacks on USPS in history, and ongoing conspiracies from the White House, the postal unions are attempting to divide workers and prevent a counter-offensive in defense of jobs and democratic rights.

The example for postal workers today remains 1970. Workers did not wait for authorization from the government or the union apparatus. They took the initiative, crossed craft and geographic boundaries, defied the strike ban and demonstrated their immense social power.

That initiative must now be consciously organized on a national scale through rank-and-file committees independent of the bureaucracy. Postal workers must unite all crafts, prepare collective action to stop closures and layoffs, reject binding arbitration and the strike ban, and demand full public funding of USPS as a public service. The privately owned logistics giants—UPS, FedEx and Amazon—must be transformed into public utilities under workers’ democratic control.



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