

APWU bureaucracy enables Trump's attack on mail voting

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The American Postal Workers Union (APWU) bureaucracy is enabling the Trump administration's anti-democratic attack on mail-in voting by refusing to mobilize the workers whose compliance the operation requires. Postal workers should organize independently of the bureaucracy, refuse to carry out the new ballot verification and rejection procedures, and defend any worker victimized for doing so.

For the second time in six years, Trump is attempting to steal a national election. After his defeat in 2020, he tried to stop the certification of Biden's victory, culminating in the January 6 assault on the Capitol by far-right militias and other Trump supporters. He is now targeting mail-in voting, which accounted for about 30 percent of ballots cast in 2024, calling mail-in ballots "inherently corrupt" and saying, "Hopefully there will be no mail-in ballots."

Trump's March 31 executive order directed USPS to impose new conditions on federal ballot mail. USPS published a proposed rule on June 2 and a final rule on August 26. State and local election officials must submit voter and barcode data to a new Federal Ballot Mail Portal, then present outgoing federal ballot mail for verification before USPS will accept it. Mailings that fail the new requirements can be rejected and returned. The rule gives that campaign a federal choke point over ballots state officials have already decided to send.

In an amicus brief filed with the Supreme Court on Wednesday, the APWU warned that the final USPS rule could produce "catastrophic wholesale non-delivery" of mail ballots to hundreds of thousands of voters.

The courts have repeatedly ruled against the legality of the order. On September 4, US District Judge Indira Talwani issued a preliminary injunction against the order's mandatory provisions for the midterms, and on Thursday the First Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the injunction.

The administration has also asked the Supreme Court to lift it. That emergency application remains pending, with the government filing its reply Thursday as ballots are already being mailed in several states.

It is not outside the realm of possibility that the Supreme Court, stacked with a 6-3 right-wing majority, will rule in favor of Trump. It already lifted a lower court's injunction in late August. But even if the Supreme Court rules against the

administration, Trump is not playing by a normal constitutional framework. It is possible the fascistic president will attempt to enforce the executive order anyway.

The issue will be decided in struggle. Trump's ability to sabotage the election and restrict the right to vote can be countered only through a mass movement, led and centered in the working class, against dictatorship.

While the APWU in June declared that it "rejects the premise that the USPS had to comply with the Executive Order," it has directed its members toward public comments, litigation and other official channels.

APWU President Jonathan Smith acknowledged in July that APWU-represented information technology employees were already working on the ballot portal "behind the scenes." There is no public indication that the union instructed those workers to stop.

At the union's national convention in Los Angeles in August, Smith told more than 1,800 delegates "America depends on vote by mail, and we will deliver it." Yet the union proposed no workplace action against the new restrictions. At a midterm-election briefing immediately before the convention, Legislative and Political Director Judy Beard urged members to take part in get-out-the-vote operations and build relations with "community organizations." Delegates also received an update on the executive order and instructions on complying with the Hatch Act, which limits political activity by federal employees.

Critically, the rule cannot be enforced without thousands of postal workers carrying out the procedure. APWU's Supreme Court brief itself says that when a state has not registered recipients in the Federal Ballot Mail Portal, or a ballot does not match portal data, clerks represented by APWU would have to reject it. The brief calls those clerks "indispensable" to implementation.

Outgoing federal ballot mail must be presented at a Business Mail Entry Unit (BMEU), or postal retail counter, where a BMEU technician or retail clerk checks the mailing against the portal before USPS accepts it. APWU identifies these workers as members of its bargaining units and says implementation would require access to the system at 572 BMEUs and tens of thousands of post offices.

According to a whistleblower disclosure to Congress, the

USPS designed the physical barcode sampling procedure with a zero-percent failure standard. If a sampled barcode fails verification, the USPS can refuse the entire batch until election officials correct the problem and resubmit it. Such batches can contain tens of thousands of ballots.

Once the USPS accepts outbound ballot mail, however, it enters the normal mailstream and is not subsequently intercepted, returned or delayed under the new rule.

APWU members at BMEUs and retail offices should organize collectively to refuse the new portal checks and refuse to reject lawful election mail. IT workers should stop work developing or operating the system. Rank-and-file committees should link affected workplaces and postal crafts, organize workers to continue moving legitimate election mail, and defend anyone disciplined, suspended or fired for refusing to participate.

The USPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee, formed in 2023 to oppose corporate-style restructuring, is fighting to build a network of committees uniting workers across the postal system.

The very fact that Trump is back in the White House after the January 6 coup attempt shows that the existing political institutions, including both the courts and the Democratic Party, are incapable and unwilling to defend democratic rights. It falls to the working class, the vast majority to which both parties are hostile and which is the ultimate target of Trump's plans, to play the leading role in the fight against dictatorship.

The US Post Office, first established in 1775 under Benjamin Franklin, was a major democratic achievement of the American Revolution, guaranteeing everyone access to information and the ability to take part in political life.

The use of the USPS to sabotage the midterm elections, by contrast, comes as Postmaster General David Steiner and Congress are preparing to carry out the deepest cuts in the agency's history. Steiner has established January, the period following the midterms and the holiday peak season, to begin measures such as slashing working hours, consolidating routes, expanding subcontracting and other cuts. More extreme measures, such as cutting back from six-day-a-week delivery, abolishing the Universal Service Obligation and closing post offices, are also being considered.

The fight to defend the post office and democratic rights requires workers to prepare themselves to act independently of the union apparatus. The union officials cannot be counted upon to lead this struggle because they themselves run the unions as bureaucratic dictatorships integrated with management, routinely flouting or ignoring the democratic will of the membership.

The National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) and the National Postal Mail Handlers Union (NPMHU), for example, are moving contract talks to binding arbitration, denying workers the right to vote on their contract and freeing management's hands to begin cuts.

There is historical precedent for such an independent movement. On March 18, 1970, New York letter carriers launched a wildcat strike which spread across the country. NALC President James Rademacher urged workers to return, but the strike spread to around 100 cities and involved more than 200,000 postal workers. Nixon declared a national emergency and sent 25,000 military personnel into New York to move the mail. But the soldiers could not replace an experienced postal workforce.

The strike, however, was eventually shut down by the bureaucracy, leading to the Postal Reorganization Act later that year which turned USPS into a self-funding entity. This set the stage for more than a half century of cuts and established much of the modern corporatist framework between postal management and the unions.

As the political establishment has shifted toward Trump, sections of the union apparatus have shifted with it, backing his economic nationalism or cultivating direct relations with his administration while turning to lawsuits when their own institutional interests are threatened.

The United Auto Workers leadership has embraced Trump's tariff policy, declaring in August that it will "always support strategic tariffs," including Section 232 tariffs on automobiles and heavy trucks. Teamsters officials have thanked Trump for particular tariffs and pledged to continue working with his administration on trade policy. International Longshoremen's Association President Harold Daggett has called Trump a "hero" to the union and credited him with helping secure its contract settlement.

Postal workers should build rank-and-file committees and appeal to letter carriers, mail handlers, rural carriers, other federal workers and workers throughout private industry to defend anyone punished for refusing to participate in the destruction of voting rights. Management retaliation should be answered with demonstrations, workplace action and preparations for broader industrial and political mobilization. The defense of postal workers who refuse to help obstruct lawful ballot mail can become the starting point for a wider working-class defense of the right to vote against authoritarian rule.



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