

2 serious accidents at postal processing facility in Pontiac, Michigan

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Twice this year, supervisory personnel at the US Postal Service Michigan Metroplex in Pontiac activated sorting machinery while a maintenance worker was underneath. Neither incident resulted in an injury but in other circumstances the outcome could have been tragic, resulting in death or serious injury.

According to a grievance filed by the president of APWU local, the incidents happened in May and September of 2026. Steve Woods said the unit had filed grievances and a complaint with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) as well as postal management. Woods also notified the offices of Michigan Democratic Congressional representatives Debbie Dingell, Haley Stevens and Rashida Tlaib.

The grievance filed by Woods stated, “They’ve been multiple incidents of both clerks and operations supervisors using the code” to activate the machine.

In response to the reports many workers posted on social media expressing concern and shock that proper lockout/tagout procedures on machinery were not in place at the Metroplex. One worker wrote, “I work at the metroplex and I can say [from] first-hand experience that place is being ran down to ground. This is not the first time nor the last time.” Another responded, “I work there as well and you’re absolutely right when you say it’s getting ran down to the ground.”

Another posted, “I am an ET at that facility and that machine should’ve been LOTO. (locked out) ESPECIALLY that machine! It’s over 100 ft long and taller than he is and he was INSIDE of it! So REGARDLESS of who pressed the start button, it should’ve been powered down.”

The same Pontiac facility was investigated a decade ago after workers raised the alarm over multiple employee deaths. A February 2016 USPS inspector general’s alert recorded a complaint that five workers had died in 14 months. A later APWU account gave a different chronology: four workers were taken from the plant by emergency services between October 2014 and August 2015 and subsequently died, while a fifth died under similar circumstances in June 2011. They ranged in age from 38 to 64.

One of them was Keesha Gray, 38, who died on June 9, 2015. Her family’s attorney, Brian McKeen, told WXYZ that she felt ill at work and informed managers she was going to her car. She

collapsed and died there, remaining undiscovered for nearly two hours. APWU officials questioned why managers had not noticed her prolonged absence. The medical examiner attributed her death to bronchial asthma. Her family hired McKeen to investigate whether conditions at the facility contributed.

A local mail handlers’ representative told WDIV that the five deaths involved three reported heart attacks, an asthma attack and a stroke. Coworkers also complained of headaches and coughing. The Metroplex was built on a contaminated former General Motors foundry site, with ventilation and methane-detection systems intended to prevent gas accumulating inside. The inspector general found the detection system had malfunctioned since March 2015. USPS maintained that testing showed safe methane levels; no causal link between methane and the deaths was established. Its January 2017 follow-up nevertheless documented continuing deficiencies in sensor maintenance and staff training.

The recent incidents at Pontiac of machinery restarting around maintenance workers reported at Pontiac closely resembles the circumstances in which Ronald Adams Sr. was killed at Stellantis’ Dundee Engine Complex in Michigan. On April 7, 2025, an overhead gantry suddenly activated while the 63-year-old skilled trades worker was performing maintenance, crushing him to death.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) launched an independent investigation and held a public hearing on July 27. Workers testified that management distributed “cheater keys” to bypass safety interlocks, and that lockout signs were incorrect after machinery was relocated. A Dundee worker explained the pressure behind these practices: “Management tells us to take shortcuts and ‘do the paperwork after.’”

The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee launched a similar inquiry in November 2025, following a series of postal deaths, including those of Nick Acker in Michigan and Russell Scruggs Jr. in Georgia within a week of each other.

Four workers died at the Palmetto distribution center outside Atlanta in just over two years. Shannon Barnes, 48, suffered a brain aneurysm during her night shift in August 2024. Workers reported that someone had to run outside to call 911 because there was no cell service inside, and that help took about 30 minutes to reach her. Eric Smith, 59, collapsed and died in June 2025; coworkers again reported being unable to use their cell phones to summon help.

Scruggs, 44, died on November 15, 2025, weeks after starting work at Palmetto. Coworkers said he felt ill but was refused permission to go home, then collapsed and hit his head. The autopsy obtained by the rank-and-file inquiry attributed his death to heart failure; the head wound did not cause his death. Workers reported the absence of a defibrillator, supervisors contacting security before an ambulance was called, and emergency crews being delayed for over an hour.

Demarcus Little, 45, collapsed and died at Palmetto on June 3 this year. His fiancée and coworkers reported that he, too, had told a supervisor he felt ill and was denied permission to leave. Dispatch records put the first 911 call at 11:06 p.m. and CPR in progress at 11:25 p.m., raising questions about the intervening 19 minutes.

In July 2026, Umeshkumar Thakkar, a 58-year-old rural letter carrier, died while delivering mail in the Dallas, Texas suburb of Little Elm during a heat advisory and temperatures over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. On June 21, 2025, 51-year-old Dallas-area letter carrier Jacob Taylor also collapsed and died on his mail delivery route amid extreme heat.

On November 8, 2025 postal worker Nick Acker died at the Allen Park Detroit Network Distribution Center (DNDC) facility. The 36-year-old maintenance mechanic from Trenton, Michigan, was found dead inside a mail handling machine. He had been dead six to eight hours before firefighters arrived. His fiancée, Stephanie Jaszcz, had been engaged to him for only 10 days. She waited outside the facility gates for about three hours before being told he had died.

Coworkers felt Acker's death was "100 percent preventable" and would not have happened if he had been working with a partner and USPS management had followed safety procedures. An autopsy determined the cause of death was mechanical asphyxiation.

OSHA eventually fined USPS \$26,481 for violations related to Acker's death. This was a reduction from the initial fine of \$66,200, not even a slap on the wrist. The OSHA investigation found multiple violations of the lockout/tagout procedure, which is vital for preventing accidental activation of dangerous machinery, particularly during maintenance. In particular OSHA found that postal management failed to conduct periodic inspections, required at least annually, of energy control procedures for the Alpha conveyors at the Allen Park facility. On January 28, more than two months after Acker's death, inspectors also found inadequate training in group lockout/tagout procedures for maintenance workers and supervisors repairing another conveyor.

OSHA also determined that USPS failed to enforce lockout/tagout protocols.

Similar conditions exist at postal facilities around the country. Postal workers filed 38,977 federal workers' compensation claims in 2025. That was almost half of all federal workers' comp cases opened that year.

These are just a few of the deaths and life-threatening situations workers have suffered resulting from the efficiency schemes and speed up imposed by management and their collaborators in the union bureaucracy as safety conditions erode. These measures are aimed at improving "efficiency" and slashing costs in preparation

for the privatization of the post office.

These attacks have accelerated under the Delivering for America (DFA) restructuring launched by former Postmaster General Louis DeJoy in 2021. The plan consolidates work into fewer, larger automated facilities, cuts jobs and combines routes; Palmetto opened as part of this program. Workers' testimony to the postal inquiry described billions being invested in automated equipment while basic medical equipment, trained medical staff and written emergency procedures were absent. Cutting staffing and treating every interruption as lost productivity puts workers under pressure to keep working through illness and to service machinery without adequate safeguards.

DeJoy's successor, David Steiner, is preparing further cuts after the New Year. At the August 7 Board of Governors meeting, he said management "would not take any action until after the New Year," while threatening changes to service standards and the closure of "thousands of unprofitable post offices." He has told Congress that USPS plans to employ 30,000 to 35,000 fewer workers within four years. Further reductions would intensify the understaffing and overwork already endangering workers while accelerating the dismantling of the post office as a public service.

No confidence can be placed in the APWU bureaucracy, Democratic politicians, OSHA or USPS to address these conditions or to implement the measures needed to keep postal workers safe. Acker's coworkers told the WSWs that safety grievances had been filed less than 90 days before his death and that APWU officials knew about them. One worker described disabled stop switches and the removal of the additional worker who should have been available to stop the machinery. The grievance machinery left these dangers unresolved.

The APWU leadership continues to channel opposition into appeals to Congress. At its August convention, President Jonathan Smith declared: "Congress just has to get off of their ass and act." But at a House hearing in March, ranking Democrat Kweisi Mfume said USPS "obviously needs to cut costs and increase revenue." The union apparatus subordinates workers to the same political framework of cost cutting that management invokes to justify restructuring. Workers need organizations capable of enforcing safety against management's production demands.

The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee is fighting these conditions based on mobilizing the independent strength of workers themselves. It unites postal workers across the US, Canada and internationally in a common fight. Workers must organize at their worksites independently of the union apparatus to assert their own interests. These committees give workers the means to expose unsafe conditions and organize a collective fight back, including worker oversight of safety and the right to refuse unsafe work.



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