

Workers face loss of more than 100,000 jobs as Obama joins attack on postal service

By our reporters
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The US Postal Service, claiming that it faces annual losses that will mount to \$18.2 billion by 2015, has announced that it will go ahead with the elimination of up to 264 mail processing centers around the country, reducing the postal workforce by up to 155,000 jobs, on top of the 130,000 jobs that have been cut over the past three years.

President Barack Obama's budget for the 2013 fiscal year calls for the destruction of tens of thousands of postal positions, as well as the elimination of Saturday mail delivery as early as January 2013.

Other attacks on the immediate agenda are the end or the weakening of the overnight delivery guarantee for first class mail, and the closure of up to 3,700 post offices around the country, devastating many neighborhoods as well as small towns and rural areas where the poor and elderly are particularly dependent upon their local post office.

The congressional attack on postal workers and the population as a whole is a bipartisan one. Leading the campaign is the right-wing Republican representative from California, Darrell Issa. Issa, chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, has introduced legislation that will, among other things, create a new oversight board for the postal service with the power to override union contracts and managerial decisions.

Meanwhile, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders has secured the signatures of 26 other Senate Democrats who object to the drastic cuts and propose various other measures and less draconian attacks. Sanders, who sometimes calls himself a "socialist," in fact functions as a loyal member of the Democratic caucus and a supporter of the Obama administration. The Obama White House has itself announced its agreement with many of the cuts, including the elimination of Saturday mail delivery. Obama's proposed 2013 budget also calls for the restructuring of postal employee health benefits, which will translate into postal workers paying more for their health benefits and receiving less.

The ongoing attacks on the postal service have their origin in the creation of the USPS itself 40 years ago. As a quasi-governmental agency under congressional control, the postal service has adopted the for-profit business model. Unlike other government agencies, it must balance its books and pay

its own way without government subsidy. This business model was aimed from the outset at suppressing the militant postal workforce and also at the eventual privatization of the whole mail delivery system.

An example of the ruthless congressional assault on this vital public service is the 2006 legislation that mandates the USPS to, over the next decade, prepay the health care benefits of current and future employees for the next 75 years. This is a mandate that no other private or public institution faces.

So drastic are the implications of the end of the first-class mail guarantee that the USPS was forced earlier this month to announce a "suspension of the consolidation efforts during the election mailing season to avoid any adverse effect on the November election." One out of five voters now casts ballots by mail, and delays in mail delivery could lead to confusion, chaos and even disqualification of many votes.

The only response of the unions to the devastating attacks on postal jobs and services has been to organize toothless protests and ad campaigns, while solidifying their alliance with the Democratic representatives of big business. The AFL-CIO Executive Board, including representatives of the National Association of Letter Carriers and American Postal Workers Union, just voted unanimously to endorse Obama's bid for a second term. The union executives and the Democratic politicians are united in opposition to any struggle for the full funding and expansion of the postal service.

A number of postal workers in the metropolitan New York area spoke to the WSWs about Obama's call for the elimination of Saturday delivery.

Jason Robinson is a letter carrier with five years service at the Main Post Office in Flushing, Queens. He said, "I am not for the elimination of Saturday mail service because eventually it will lead to layoffs and cutbacks. It will probably eliminate floaters and subs. A floater is someone who does my route on my day off. I work five days a week, and then the floater takes my route on the sixth day. With the elimination of Saturday delivery, then there would be no need for the floaters. All told I think this may eliminate 100,000 jobs.

"I thought the Democrats were supposed to help. They would make things easier and support the working class. This is not helpful. It is harmful. If you eliminate 17 percent of USPS

service and lay off a lot of people, you are not helping the economy.

“They should find a way to encourage people to use first class mail. Give people a reason to use it. This means making sure the delivery service is better, not worse. This is like what is happening to the New York City transit system, the MTA. You can’t cut the service, raise the prices and force the workers to do more work for less money.”

Michael Quinn is a letter carrier from the Cambria Heights Post Office. “I totally disagree with the elimination of Saturday service,” he said. “The main thing is a lot of people are going to lose their jobs.

“Think about what will happen to mail delivery after holidays. The holidays are celebrated on Mondays. Then there will be Saturday, Sunday and Monday with no mail delivery. Sometimes a carrier will be sick or call off after a holiday. Then we are going to have an open route where nobody delivers the mail on that route, and tons of mail piling up at the post office.

“These are the Democrats making this decision. We thought the Democrats were on our side. I would like a party of the working class for jobs and wage increases. The post office already makes us work for free for a half hour a day. They call it ‘undertime.’ When you get a half hour overtime because you need it to do all the sorting and delivering, you just get paid for 8 hours or they will write you up because they have determined the job should only take 8 hours.

“They are also cutting letter carriers’ routes in the area. They haven’t gotten to our office yet. I have heard about carriers delivering mail in the dark, and that is no good.”

Clifford Flottee III, a technical letter carrier in Great Neck, Long Island, New York, one of the biggest post offices in the metro New York area, said: “The money Congress is forcing the USPS to pay to fund 75 years of our health care and pensions up front, rather than pay as you go like every other entity in the country, is the reason for the shortfall at the post office. And what has the government done with this money? I think they used it to bail out the banks.

“This elimination of Saturday delivery will eliminate the floaters in the post office. I am a floater. That is what a technical letter carrier does. On the day off of the regular letter carriers, their routes become the job of floaters. Floaters have to go through a tour. Then based on seniority you will pick your route. The technical letter carrier is a carrier who holds down a number of routes in an office. There might be 10-12 technical carriers out of 100 carriers in my office. This is about the average ratio for a post office. There are also transitionals. There are no more casuals, but there are flexes who do this work as well. This is another ten people in our office. One of the reasons for this is that the post office hasn’t made anyone a regular since 2004. These jobs are the number of job cuts immediately with the elimination of Saturday delivery. It could be almost as high as 25 percent of the letter carrier workforce

in a post office.

“This would hurt the people who count on magazines on Saturday like *Barrons Weekly* or newspapers like the *Wall Street Journal* or anything else. Birthday cards and medicines couldn’t get through, and when holidays fall on Monday, this is going to be horrible. I actually think they are holding back on Saturday mail deliveries as it is.

“In Great Neck and other stations, carriers have car contracts. It calls for you to use your car, and the post office will pay you for gas, wear and tear, and parcel delivery. I think the parcel rate is 50 cents a parcel. However, we haven’t gotten paid for six months for our cars. This is about \$800 to \$900 that the post office owes us. I didn’t get paid for a year. One time I didn’t have the money to make my car payment. I work two jobs and 10 hours a day. One job is the post office, and the other job is working with the mentally handicapped. I have worked at the post office for 20 years.

“I won’t vote for Obama. Why should you vote for someone who is cutting your throat? All the people in government in both parties are millionaires and billionaires, and that is who controls them.”

Yolanda Grant works as a clerk at the Morgan facility in Manhattan, with 28 years experience. “They are trying to privatize the postal service and union bust us,” she said. “They are bringing in mail from Brooklyn to our station and we already have it in the building from the Bronx. Not the people, the workers from those facilities. The people left behind are excessed and their jobs abolished. It is more volume, more work for us. To handle it, they are drafting people who are on the overtime list. And they hire part-time employees, called PSEs, who are in the union but don’t have the benefits.

“They want to get workers to take the voluntary package and get out so they can hire temps and not pay health benefits. The union used to be different. I remember when we used to join forces and rally with other locals but we don’t do that anymore.”

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