

Hands off the post office!

written by Stephen Millies

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Postal workers rally outside the Thompson Center in Chicago, 2011.

The post office is needed now more than ever. Postal workers are delivering

prescription medicines and plenty of other mail and packages to people's homes during this health crisis.

They're doing so at the risk of their own lives. At least 44 postal workers have died of COVID-19 and over 1,200 have tested positive for the virus, says Cathy Hanson, a retired postal worker and editor for the Minneapolis Area Local, American Postal Workers Union, at usmailnotforsale.org.

Even capitalists need the post office. So why do Trump and his fellow billionaires want to destroy the oldest department of the U.S. government that dates back to 1775? Because the Postal Service is the largest employer of union workers in the United States.

After decades of deindustrialization, with dozens of factory towns like Detroit and Milwaukee impoverished, the post office is like an oasis of unionism. This is particularly true in the Deep South and some Western states.

The wealthy and powerful never forgave postal employees for their 1970 rebellion. The 200,000 workers who went on a wildcat strike won a victory for all poor and working people.

Fifty years ago, the starting salary of postal workers was less than \$3 per hour. On March 12, 1970, members of Congress voted themselves a 41 percent pay hike. But they offered post office employees a mere 5.4 percent raise, which was less than the inflation rate.

Letter carrier and future union leader Vincent Sombrotto urged workers to fight back. The response of workers, starting in New York City, was to go [on strike on March 18, 1970](#). It was the 99th anniversary of the Paris Commune, the world's first working-class government.

President Richard "Watergate" Nixon declared a state of emergency and wanted to

fire the workers. [He ordered thousands of GIs to break the strike.](#)

United Mine Workers president, John L. Lewis, declared during an earlier case of presidential strikebreaking by Franklin Roosevelt that “you can’t dig coal with bayonets.” You can’t sort or deliver mail with bayonets either.

Many of the soldiers had parents who were union members and didn’t want to cross picket lines. Members of the American Servicemens’ Union — an anti-war and anti-racist union of GIs — urged soldiers to support the strikers.

Beat back the Trump attack

The working class — employed, unemployed and incarcerated — has been under attack for over 40 years. Reagan’s breaking of the PATCO air traffic controllers’ strike in 1981 was also revenge for the 1970 postal rebellion.

There’ve been cutbacks and givebacks at the post office. Employment has fallen from almost 800,000 workers in 1999 [to slightly less than a half-million in 2019.](#)

The starting pay of part-time rural letter carriers was [cut by about \\$6 per hour](#) in the 2010 labor contract, although it rose from around \$15 to \$17 per hour in the 2015 contract.

Because of the increased use of email, [first class mail like letters has fallen](#) from 104 billion pieces in 2001 to 55 billion last year. Trump points to this decline as an excuse for more attacks.

Yet 55 billion pieces is still a lot of mail — an average of 167 letters per person annually. The Post Office is also handling more packages than ever, including 40 percent of Amazon’s shipments.

Another reason all the Trumps hate the postal service is that it’s [the largest](#)

[employer of Black workers earning more than \\$50,000 a year.](#)

Close to 40 percent of postal workers are Asian, Black, Latinx or Indigenous. [Two-fifths of the workforce are women.](#)

The noted actor and human rights activist [Danny Glover wrote](#) about what the post office meant to him growing up:

“For my parents, both longtime postal employees and union officers, that was their community. Back then, it was mine, too. ...

“For Black families like mine, the Postal Service has long been one of the few reliable paths to the middle class.

“My parents were so proud in 1957, when they had saved enough money to buy a house. They sometimes held union meetings in our living room and had me put my seventh-grade typing skills to good use addressing envelopes for the union newsletter.”

Rainbow coalition needed

Trump wants to privatize the Postal Service and the Veterans’ hospitals. We won’t let him! Postal unions mobilized to stop Staples from selling stamps, which would have served as an excuse to fire post office employees.

Trillions of dollars have been handed out to bail out the banksters and big corporations. So why can’t Congress find a few billion to save the post office?

People get ripped off by ATM fees. Why can’t the post office offer savings accounts, as it did until 1967?

If Trump gets his way, many postal workers in the big cities will lose jobs and benefits. But rural areas, including Indigenous peoples living on reservations, will

suffer too.

Cell phone monopolies refuse to offer service to millions of people living in remote areas, from Alaska to the Everglades. But postal workers deliver mail everywhere.

Dozens of car caravans have been organized recently. They've demanded freedom for prisoners endangered by COVID-19 and/or a moratorium on rents and mortgage payments.

We need to organize long-distance caravans to tell people that local post offices are in danger of shutting down. These caravans would strive to unite multinational metropolitan areas like Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles and New York City with largely white rural areas.

This rainbow coalition on wheels would run over Trump's bigotry.

One more thing. [Benjamin Franklin](#), the first U.S. postmaster general, was a racist and a slave owner. His face should be taken off the \$100 bill and could be replaced with that of Frazier B. Baker.

Baker was the Black postmaster of Lake City, S.C., who was fatally shot in 1898 by a white mob who also killed his baby daughter. [The local post office is now named after Baker.](#)

Long live the memory of Frazier B. Baker! Hands off the post office!

