

Atlanta-area postal worker dies on the job

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Atlanta-area postal worker Shannon Barnes collapsed on the job on Sunday, August 18 from a brain aneurysm and later died, after her co-workers were unable to call 911 in a timely manner due to a lack of cellphone coverage in the vast facility where they worked.

Barnes, a 48-year-old mother, worked at the US Postal Service's Regional Distribution Center in Palmetto, Georgia. It was a full 30 minutes after losing consciousness before she received medical attention, and by then it was too late. Doctors later told Barnes' family she had already passed away by the time she reached the hospital.

Reporters from WSB-TV in Atlanta interviewed workers at the facility, who reported that they were unable to place calls or text messages inside the building, or even call 911. It has been reported that an employee had to leave the facility to find a cell signal and call an ambulance, a critical delay that may have cost Barnes' her life.

Barnes's son Quenious Holmes told the network that "his mother always complained about not being able to use her phone inside the distribution center" and "It was real devastating. We were told a lot of stories—there's been a lot of stories... I think something's going on at that post office because it isn't my first time hearing about this."

This tragic death is only the latest in a series of fatalities and life-threatening injuries that USPS workers have suffered in recent years as the speed-ups and efficiency schemes imposed upon them by management and their collaborators in the union bureaucracy erode what few job protections remain.

Barnes's death follows that of fellow postal worker Wendy Johnson of Fayetteville, North Carolina, on June 6 of this year. Johnson, a 20-year veteran of USPS, was found unresponsive in a bathroom at her facility shortly after returning from her route and later

died in the hospital. The temperature that day was 95 degrees.

There can be little doubt that the lack of cell coverage inside the sorting facility was a deliberate choice on the part of USPS. The distribution center where Shannon Barnes died is a new facility, recently built and opened in February 2024. The Postal Service bosses no doubt calculated that preventing workers from using their phones on the job would improve profitability, and if a worker occasionally dies as a result, it would be worth the cost.

The distribution center in Palmetto is one of a new series of giant postal hubs opened under the exploitative "Delivering For America" plan that USPS first rolled out in 2021. DFA aims to make the USPS profitable by eliminating local post offices, merging operations into fewer and more extensive facilities, and "increasing efficiency" by imposing speed-ups and putting workers out on the street. Postmaster General Louis DeJoy has gone on record stating that DFA will lead to the loss of 10,000 letter carrier routes and 50,000 jobs.

The goal of DFA is to set the conditions for the privatization of USPS, so that it might more effectively compete with UPS, FedEx, and Amazon.

The Palmetto center consolidated four smaller units that serviced the Atlanta area, and its operational roll-out has been a disaster. From the outset, the facility, which has a capacity of *200 loading docks*, snarled mail delivery throughout the Atlanta Metro area, home to over 6 million people. Only 37 percent of inbound mail handled by the Palmetto center was delivered on time in March, shortly after the facility opened.

The mail delays have caused a cascading set of disruptions. Medications, mail-in ballots, income-tax filings and other important documents have taken weeks to be delivered or failed to show up at all. A series of investigations by local media led to

congressional hearings where DeJoy doubled down on the need for DFA but agreed to slow its implementation.

A recently released report by the office of the inspector general found that the Palmetto facility was understaffed by nearly two-thirds when it opened and that management had failed to train postal employees on the machinery and processes at the new facility.

Under DFA, letter carriers also face heightened exploitation. USPS installed a monitoring system in May 2023 in collaboration with the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) union known as the Technology Integrated Alternate Route Evaluation and Adjustment Process (TIAREAP). This system monitors workers' activities to ensure they're always working and there is no downtime.

Rural carriers are monitored by a similar program, the Rural Route Evaluated Compensation System (RRECS). A worker that the WSWS interviewed said that under the RRECS, which is the system that determines their pay, there are "counts." These counts are two-week periods designed to determine the amount of time it takes to deliver the mail, using a highly complicated system based on GPS. The problem is, when carriers deliver mail based on GPS, the system doesn't consider that a worker may have to climb multiple flights of stairs or drive through maze-like parking lots in an apartment complex. It also doesn't allow for the time it takes to remove and load mail from and into large mailboxes in the complexes.

All these issues happen while workers are driven harder and harder with less time to complete their tasks in triple-digit heat, affecting workers in the warehouses and the routes.

Another significant issue is that during these "counts," the amount of mail is much less. As the worker indicated, the mail volume is much higher after a weekend because even though the carriers aren't delivering, people are still mailing letters and packages. However, during the count, the volume of mail decreased. Since the letter carriers are paid based on the amount of mail they deliver, they're sometimes being cheated by up to 20 percent.

The worker stated, "There are times when the customer asks you to check on a package, and I would do some research with my supervisor where I'm trying to locate a package, and they would say, "Oh, it's been

in California for two weeks," because If I scan that package, I get credit for that package. So, something is happening where some days we are light on packages, and other days we're light on mail. Every day is an evaluation when we are on the count. I have to enter information on our scanners."

Postal workers all over the US-and the world-face a common struggle. Abandoned by their unions, which have long functioned as an arm of management, they are forced to work harder for less pay as management utilizes all the advances of modern technology to extract maximum productivity from each worker, even at the cost of their lives.

The Postal Workers Rank-And-File Committee was formed last year to fight back against this state of affairs. Composed of postal workers across the US, and internationally, The PWRFC laid out the way forward in their founding statement:

The only way forward is to organize ourselves, put forward our own program of demands, and place rank-and-file workers in every position critical to our job security, safety, wages, bargaining and so on. We must prepare action from below to assert the will of 635,000 career and non-career USPS workers to make sure our needs and interests take absolute priority and not the slash-and-burn policies of corporate-controlled politicians.

If you agree with this, contact us today and join the Committee by emailing USPSRankandFileCommittee@gmail.com or filling out the form below.



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