

STRIKING WORKERS SEEK FEDERAL SUPPORT TO BOLSTER RAPIDLY DECLINING US POSTAL SERVICE



A small group of 10 Postal workers along with union activists and supporters, protesting against Congress's failure to address the problem of the US Postal Service's worsening finances and services, went on a four-day hunger strike, beginning Monday. The group belongs to the Communities and Postal Workers United and was only recently formed and have been endorsed by groups in the Occupy movement, as well as local chapters of several postal unions. The postal service is due to make changes that will end overnight delivery of up to 20 percent of first-class mail, as mail-sorting hubs are closed. The strikers hope to make their stand prior to that. Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio), who led Monday's rally in front of the U.S. Capitol in a speech, beseeched Congress to end prefunding of health benefits, which he said was taking away more than \$5 billion from the postal service's ledger. Asked if he has any intentions of joining the strikers, Kucinich said, "I'm a vegan, so I'm kind of hungry all the time. I'm here in moral support of their efforts." "The postal service has adapted to the change in the volume of mail," said Jamie Partridge, a national coordinator of Communities and Postal Workers United. "That's not what's killing the postal service. Not the Internet. Not private competition. Not even the recession. It's this prefunded mandate." "I will continue to fight any efforts to weaken the Postal Service, including any efforts to privatize essential services," Kucinich said. "There are ways to generate revenue without cutting jobs, essential services and closing vital post office branches in communities that rely on them." The activists say that the budgetary measures are an effort to privatize and dismantle the cash-strapped United States Postal Service. The strikers agenda over the four days of the strike is to march to the Capitol from the postal service headquarters at L'Enfant Plaza; the following day they plan a protest outside the Washington Post offices on 15th Street NW. On the fourth and concluding day of the strike they will rally in front of USPS headquarters, where they said they'll try to meet with Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe. The activists said they are protesting a series of Post editorials that advocate more cost-cutting and allege that USPS labor contracts are too charitable to workers. However, their main ire is focused on the Congress, which has delayed reform legislation. There are many bills lying in the house awaiting clearance. The Senate approved a bill in April that would rebalance postal finances by giving billions of dollars to offer buyouts and early retirement incentives to employees. On this day the strikers will wear a shirt with the tagline reading: "Congress is starving the postal service." However the Republicans say that the postal service is unable to see the competition and challenges posed by the changing modes of communication and are incapable of adapting to it. Surveys show that the postal service's mail volume decreased to 169 billion pieces of mail in 2011, a 17 percent drop from the 202.8 billion pieces delivered in 2002. "Ever since [the postal service's] creation, Congress has layered on new rules and unfunded mandates," said Ali Ahmad, a spokesman for Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.), chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee. "Collective bargaining agreements that have prohibited them from making changes bring us to our current situation, where mail volume is declining. And mail volume is declining for reasons that are very good for the economy. People don't use as much paper anymore." The basic premise of the strike is that that cuts to service — slower mail, reduced window hours at 13,000 rural post offices, closing down of processing plants — will not solve the problems but add to it. These were revenue generating areas and the department stands to lose out on revenue. Moreover, it is also a human resource issue. Tens of thousands of jobs will be lost through buyouts and attrition. "You reduce service, and people give up on the service," said Jamie Partridge, a retired letter carrier from Portland who is coming to Washington to strike. "It's a self-fulfilling prophecy." The activists said that it was wrong to assume that declining mail volume and union contracts were the cause of the department's monetary problems. The financial woes can easily be resolved if the Congress would allow the postal service access to funds it has paid into health benefit and pension funds. Among those is a 2006 law that required USPS to prefund retiree health benefits through 2016 — at more than \$5 billion a year. "The pension overfunding we absolutely think should be returned to the Postal Service to help them get out of the hole that they're in and get some stability," said Sally Davidow, communications director for the American Postal Workers Union. The Senate has already passed a reform, which is awaiting clearance from the House, which said that it would return the surplus from the Federal Employee Retirement System. That bill also proposes returning all future surpluses to the agency. Yet another bill, introduced in the house would return a \$10 billion 2010 FERS surplus within a fortnight of its passage. Both bills are pending House approval. The hunger strikers are asking Postmaster Donahoe to maintain delivery standards and suspend cuts and closures until Congress acts. In a statement Friday, the postal service said, "We respect the right of our employees and retirees to engage in lawful public dialogue regarding postal issues. We have worked hard over this past year to bring to the attention of Congress, the [Obama] administration, the news media and the American public the urgent need for postal reform legislation." However, the statement did say that given the anticipated loss of 14 billion dollars this fiscal year, it would require "necessary and responsible cost-reduction steps."