

# Postal workers try to stay safe as USPS reels from dropoff in mail

USPS could run out of money by June, Congressman warned, but McConnell left it out of stimulus,

“Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.” That’s the famed slogan of the U.S. Postal Service. Epidemic can now be added to that list.

Deemed essential, over 600,000 USPS employees remain on the job, including 121,573 postal clerks and 166,343 letter carriers, delivering lifesaving and sustaining goods to customers during the outbreak.

Package volume is up enormously as people shop online from home, but mail volume is down drastically. That could be a real problem for the Postal Service. “The precipitous drop off in mail use across the country due to the coronavirus pandemic could shutter the Postal Service’s doors as early as June,” Congressman Gerald E. Connolly (D-Va.) warned Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) in a March 24 letter. Connolly—the chairman of the House subcommittee that oversees the Postal Service—asked McConnell to include re-

lief for the Postal Service in the Senate stimulus bill, but McConnell declined; the Senate bill lets USPS borrow up to \$10 billion. The scrapped House stimulus bill would have provided \$25 billion in emergency appropriations and eliminated USPS’ Congress-set \$11 billion obligation to pre-pay retiree health coverage.

## Keeping safe on the job

Are postal workers safe? USPS management, citing guidance from the Centers for Disease Control, says there have been no known cases of coronavirus spread by handling or delivering mail. But as an extra precaution, postal unions got USPS to commit to provide hand sanitizer for letter carriers to use each day, supplies to clean steering wheels and other frequently touched surfaces in postal vehicles, and masks and nitrile gloves for any employee that requests them. Most letter carriers are wearing the gloves, and are trying to limit close contact with the public: For items that require a signature, they no longer hand a device to the customer, but instead get verbal agreement to sign for them.

“We’re deemed essential, so we’re going to go out there and

do our job, but letter carriers have the same anxiety and fear that everybody else does,” says David Norton, president of National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) Branch 82.

NALC also got USPS to agree to allow letter carriers to use sick leave if they lack childcare as the result of a closed daycare or school.

With more people at home, customers are more likely than ever to see their letter carriers, but Norton asks that members of the public not approach them and maintain proper social distancing.

## STAMP OUT HUNGER FOOD DRIVE POSTPONED

The National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) annual Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive, which was scheduled for May 9, 2020, has been postponed. With much of the United States currently under shelter in place or similar advisories due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and social distancing guidelines in place indefinitely, NALC decided it was highly unlikely that those involved in the food drive would be able to safely participate just four weeks from now. NALC said it will reschedule the food drive later in 2020, when it’s safe to do so.



Workers gather outside Elliott Bay Books to announce a union March 12.

## Union, by the book

Elliott Bay Books in Seattle voluntarily recognized a new union March 13 — one day after employees announced they were forming it.

The newly formed Book Workers Union—made up of 26 workers—is described as an independent rank-and-file led organization committed to building a more just and equitable workplace through collective action. Workers had been meeting to talk about organizing since last June.

The two sides immediately

began bargaining over coronavirus protective measures. On March 15, the store closed to the public and shifted to online and phone orders only. Within days, an agreement was reached: no permanent layoffs, one week’s severance pay, and extended health coverage, and union members voted unanimously to approve it.

## UNIONIZED BOOKSTORES

- Powell’s Books in Portland
- The Strand in New York
- Green Apple Books in SF
- Elliott Bay Books in Seattle

## Why the cruise lines got left out of the \$2.2 trillion stimulus bill

When talks first began about a massive stimulus bill, President Trump said he wanted to rescue the cruise line industry. But a tricky thing about that: Decades ago, all the major cruise lines decided to save money by registering as foreign corporations, so they could pay almost no federal taxes and avoid some U.S. regulations.

Carnival Cruiselines is officially a Panamanian corporation, Royal Caribbean is Liberian, and Norwegian Cruise

Lines is registered in Bermuda. The companies also rely heavily on workers from the Philippines, Indonesia and India to staff their ship. Despite Trump’s pledge to help the industry, Congress said no way, and the grants and loans in the CARES Act may go only to corporations “created or organized in the United States or under the laws of the United States” as well as having “significant operations in” and a majority of employees based in the United States.

## ...On the front lines

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least 12 of his co-workers has tested positive for COVID-19.

For now, the whole OHSU campus is on lockdown, and no patients whatsoever are being allowed visitors except in very extreme situations. OHSU cancelled all elective surgeries to conserve protective equipment. Suspected coronavirus patients in serious condition are being assigned to the hospital’s 14th floor. Parr says he and his co-workers generally don’t know which

patients have the virus; COVID-19 presents a pretty broad set of symptoms, including cough, fever, and shortness of breath, and tests are still rationed, while results still take several days.

Parr says the hospital could reach capacity within a few weeks.

“It’s frustrating,” Parr said. “There’s this feeling that we should have been prepared for this. A global pandemic is always a threat. We should have had systems in place. Somebody dropped the ball.”



## Laborers Local 737 steps up to help

Laborers Local 737 and the Oregon Laborers Apprenticeship donated their training center supply of N-95 protective masks to do their part to support front-line health care workers in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. “We’re proud that we are able to make this donation to help support nurses and health care workers on the front-lines of treating our family members, neighbors and friends during this urgent time,” said Local 737 Business Manager Zack Culver. The Laborers union implores other unions, contractors, and trade associations that have any unused protective equipment available — no matter how small — to donate them as well. Gathering up masks is Local 737 member Bernardo Suarez-Carrillo.