

Vehicle fire—a union investigates



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Greetings! This month I am using an arbitration award as the basis for my column.

In January 2020, I wrote about vehicle fires plaguing our LLV fleet as well as a ProMaster recall that had been brought to my attention by an officer of Long Island Merged, NY Branch 6000. That recall involved the cooling fan. I browsed the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration website (nhtsa.gov) and discovered that the recall indicated that the cooling fan “may seize and cause fire” on the affected ProMaster.

I asked management at the headquarters level what they were going to do to keep our carriers safe until the recall fix was developed and implemented. Management responded with gibberish that I shared in my March 2020 column, that they “remain confident that the ProMaster vehicles in our fleet will continue to operate safely...”

Well, it didn't turn out that way. The following information is from an arbitrator's award issued on June 25, 2025 (C#37263):

On the morning of February 7, 2023, [The grievant] arrived at work to learn that her [ProMaster]...was having repairs performed at the Vehicle Maintenance Facility (VMF). [She] testified that she assumed it had something to do with prior engine issues she had brought to Management's attention. She got a ride to the VMF with a coworker and learned that they had been repairing the rear door, which had apparently had issues staying closed. When the repairs were completed, she got in the vehicle and began to leave before being stopped by a VMF technician, who noticed one of her headlights was out. That, too, was repaired, and she was finally able to leave for the streets.

The grievant carried mail to the first four blocks on her route and returned to her vehicle. When she turned the ignition, however, the engine caught fire. The grievant testified that fire came billowing through the windshield. She stated that the doors would not open for her either. She tried the driver's side door, the passenger door, and the rear door, but could not get out of the vehicle. She was understandably terrified, testifying that she began to realize that she was going to die in that vehicle. Fortunately, a ‘Good Samaritan’ was there and busted through the win-

dows. He then manually unlocked the door, allowing [her] to escape the burning vehicle.

The arbitrator explained that, following the event, the “fire investigators” contracted by the USPS did their job in attempting to determine the cause of the fire. The arbitrator noted that: “Whether intentional or not, the record also shows that the cooling fan module, the supposed cause of the fire, had been thrown away in a VMF dumpster prior to Mr. Meyers coming in to conduct his investigation...”

The arbitrator addresses the multiple requests for information by the union, including the request for the Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) so the union could determine if the vehicle was affected by the recall. Management claimed that the vehicle was not serviced by the USPS, but rather that the servicing was done by the dealership and that they had no records of the service.

The arbitrator's opinion included this:

There was a vehicle that had a recall on the cooling fan module. The vehicle, with an employee inside of it, burst into flames spontaneously. The technical consultant hired by the Postal Service, who is an expert in such matters, concluded that the fire likely emanated from the cooling fan module. He noted that there were no records of the recall repair actually being performed. No record of the repair being performed was ever shared with the Union at the lower steps of this dispute. If the repair did take place, there is no proof of it in the record before me. The VMF Manager told Mr. Meyer the work was done and Supervisor Davis testified that, to his knowledge, it was done, but there is no documentary evidence to support those claims. At best, the Service violated the Handbook PO-701's instruction to ‘obtain a copy of the repair order, nocharge invoice, or other form of documentation and place it in the VMF vehicle jacket for reference.’ At worst, they simply ignored the recall notice and a carrier nearly lost her life because of it. This was clearly a violation of Articles 14 and 19...by failing to ensure the safety of the vehicle driven by the grievant.

We hope the best for our carrier as she continues her recovery from the trauma of the event.

I also send a shout-out to Tyronne Valdez, director of safety and health for Chicago Branch 11 for the good work done by him as well as by the shop stewards and our arbitration advocate.

I continuously ask that you keep an eye on each other. I also remind you that safety depends on you because we cannot depend on management.