

Postal workers have come under a head-long assault by the USPS in the last year. Every tradition and work rule that made a post office job bearable is under attack by postal management. Meanwhile, the press is filled with stories about the "postal dinosaur" on the verge of extinction. The union leaders are in a state of panic, talking tougher but clinging more tightly to management. Rank and file postal workers, reviving from the knock-out blow of the 1975 contract defeat, have begun to organize and raise their voices in protest.

What follows is a framework for understanding these events, and a proposal for revolutionaries organizing in the rank and file postal workers movement.

#### The crisis of the Postal Service

The postal deficit for the year ending June 30, 1976 will be about \$1.4 billion, almost as much as the five previous years combined. The cause of the deficit and the decline in service is the general economic crisis. Inflation has driven up all postal costs. Mail volume dropped off significantly during the 1974-75 depression. Congress, traditionally responsible for subsidizing the postal deficit, is under political and economic pressure to hold down its share.

Because of this crisis, the USPS has recently come under attack from government leaders and the media. The postal "experiment" has allegedly failed. Some, like Treasury Secretary Simon, favor revising the private express statutes to allow for private competition in first class mail. Others favor a return to direct Congressional control over the post office.

But contrary to the belief of many people, including many postal workers, there is no major conspiracy to destroy the postal service at this time. No section of big business is prepared to take on the postal service and take over its functions. The electronic technology required to replace written communications is too expensive and inaccessible. Certain companies such as UPS and private delivery services, will compete with the USPS for a portion of its business. But there is no substitute available for the system as a whole.

What all the postal critics can agree on is that the postal service must be "rationalized". Large-volume mailers are speaking through their mouthpieces in media and government to demand efficiency and an end to "feather-bedding." To them, the traditional work standards, especially the relatively flexible work day of the mailhandlers and carriers, means "swollen payrolls." Even the liberal magazine New Republic attacked "feather-bedding" and the no-layoff clause in

a recent issue. The postal service is necessary for big business. It's smooth functioning translates into profit margins for them. Even a delay of one day can mean millions of dollars in lost interest in check clearance, for example. Therefore, "rationalizing" the USPS is an important goal of big business.

Their program of rationalization will involve some service cuts. But these cuts will be carefully selected to protect service to big mailers. Saturday deliveries, for instance, may be sacrificed because most businesses don't rely on Saturday mail in any case. Rate structures will begin to favor business more and more. The Postal Rate Commission has already approved a proposal that will reduce first class rates to 12¢ for large-volume mailers. For first class mail, this is an unprecedented and important step.

The program also involves mechanization. Despite problems with integrating machinery, especially in the bulk centers, this is an important part of the long-run cost-cutting program. 85% of postal costs are wages and salaries (of course, that includes Level 36's, etc.). Cutting this percentage reduces the impact that an organized workforce can have over postal costs. Finally, machines such as the LSM's help USPS regiment and speed up the workforce.

But the key to "rationalization" is the current productivity drive against postal workers. Postmaster General Benjamin Bailar's program is to maintain service at a level consistent with big business needs while cutting back the workforce. Over the last four years, 35,000 jobs have been cut, out of about 700,000. USPS hopes to cut 50,000 more in the next three years. This includes 25,000 through combining carrier routes, 35,000 through forced transfers, and 6,000 through the closing of small offices.

All of the attacks on working conditions are part of this drive: route adjustments, through Kokomo and more standard methods; speed-up for inside workers (e.g., overtime cutbacks, re-posting and reverting jobs, and re-writing work standards through P.I.P. and other methods); forced transfers, resulting in dis-location and voluntary lay-offs; harassment, as a way to break militancy and force resignations; closing and consolidating small post offices; tightening up on sick and annual leave, resulting in resignations and terminations. A significant part of this program is designed to cut the workforce without directly violating the no-layoff clause -- forced transfers, harassment, and the hiring freeze are prime examples.

#### Turmoil in the Union Bureaucracies

The USPS offensive has led to significant developments in the major

postal union bureaucracies over the last six months. In the NALC, a group of local presidents calling itself the "Ad Hoc Committee" met. Led by New York President Vince Sombrotto, the group called on the national union leaders to respond more energetically to the attacks. In the APWU a similar group of local presidents met and pleaded with the national union leaders to "do something."

Pres. Ellbey and the APWU executive board responded by announcing a "break" from USPS management and launching a media campaign. The campaign, soon joined by the NALC, has stressed postal mis-management and the fact that postal workers are not to blame for disintegrating service. They propose the solution of a higher Congressional subsidy to USPS. While superficially a move toward militancy, two aspects of the campaign indicate that the bureaucracies are firmly locked into a rightward path: 1) the money for the APWU campaign will drain its entire strike fund, and 2) they have thrown their support behind a 100% pro-management senate bill which provides for a 10% subsidy and a "blue ribbon commission" to study postal operations.

In the NALC, this strategy by the bureaucracy has not been nearly enough to protect their status quo. With its rank and file receiving the brunt of the current speed-up and with memories of a victory through militancy in 1970, the crisis has deeper consequences for the bureaucracy. In May, Rademacher announced that he would not run for the presidency this year, implying that dissent with the union was the reason. The rest of the bureaucracy has split, and two members of Rademacher's team have announced their candidacies for national president. One is Gus Johnson, former president of the New York branch, apparently Rademacher's hand picked successor. The other is Joe Vacca, former Cleveland branch president, currently a national vice-president.

Waiting in the wings as the third presidential candidate is Sombrotto. With a split bureaucracy, he is in an excellent position to win on his "rank and file" ticket. Sombrotto has retreated considerably since he associated himself with the 1970 strike movement. His own carriers in New York are now faced with the loss of 15% of their routes due to cuts in downtown deliveries. Sombrotto has done nothing to stop these cuts. His role in national union affairs has degenerated from building a national rank and file network to building a campaign machine for himself. For example, as the possibility of a strike in Seattle loomed in May, his branch refused to consider concrete sympathetic action to back up Seattle carriers.

Nonetheless, Sombrotto still represents a progressive force that we must support. He is still willing to fight for a more democratic union, and has taken the lead in opposing Rademacher's restructuring proposals that would further bureaucratize the union. He stands as the one person who can at this time break the hold of Rademacher politics over the union, giving real rank and file forces room to organize. His victory would raise the expectations of carriers everywhere, which could translate into independent rank and file action. We must support him on these grounds, continue to criticize him for his current activity, and warn against his probable sellouts once he is elected.

### The Ranks Revive

The 1975 contract defeat had a deadening effect on rank and file activity and morale. Management won what amounted to a wage cut, and they secured a green light to implement the current productivity drive. USPS came out of the contract period cocky and aggressive. The union leaders crowed about how they had helped save the postal service. The large vote in favor of contract ratification demoralized militants. The rank and file groups built before or during the contract fight fell apart or degenerated.

Two major factors have re-opened the struggle. One is the general attacks resulting from the economic squeeze. The Postmaster's letter to all employees in November 1975 was the official announcement of a new level of attacks. All workers, inside and outside, have been hit hard. The other factor is the opening of most of the bulk centers. The BMC's are generally staffed by younger workers, many of whom were forced to transfer from their homes in other cities. BMC management, learning lessons from UPS, has established a get-tough attitude toward work rules, breaks, etc. Safety conditions are terrible, forced overtime has been very heavy. In addition, the union situation is generally very fluid, with younger militants thrust into leadership positions in the APWU and the Mailhandlers locals.

The result has been a slow growth of organization and protest by the rank and file. Some actions have been initially organized by the local bureaucracies, such as the large rally in San Diego in March. Others, such as the Seattle strike vote and a slowdown in the Philadelphia BMC, arose more spontaneously with rank and file sentiment. Rank and file organizations has lagged behind militant sentiment. However, from zero groups in the early fall, there is now one solid group, several newsletters, and other looser groupings. The leadership of revolutionaries has been crucial in building and maintaining these groups.

### A Two-Year Perspective

The two years between now and the next contract will be key for the development of a rank and file movement in the post office. In all likelihood, we will push for the formation of a rank and file contract coalition around the fall of 1977. In the meantime, we must build local groups, fight the attacks, build the Rank and File Postal Worker, and make some interventions in the national union arena.

Local groups are the foundation of our work. Where possible, we organize across union lines to build a united postal rank and file group in one city. The key issues will be the attack on working conditions (speed-up, harassment, forced overtime), and the attack on job security (forced transfers, elimination of jobs, short hours for subs). All groups that we participate in must become known as the leading fighters against racist discrimination and second class status for women. If this means bringing issue such as Gary Tyler or bussing into the work, then that must be done. If this means raising issues such as maternity leave and childcare, even if they are not a central part of the new attacks, then we must do that.

We must see to it that the groups we build and work in make an active fight against the attacks on the work floor. The key today is breaking through people's fears and skepticism about changing anything at the postoffice. Organizing the power of the ranks to win even a minor victory, such as the recent "freeze-out" at the Pittsburgh GPO, is more crucial than anything else we do. With local gains under their belts, local groups will be prepared to go into the 1978 contract fight than they were in 1975.

The Rank and File Postal Worker must be strengthened and broadened. The paper cannot act at this point as the voice of a tightly organized national rank and file network. It will continue to function in the pre-contract period as a tool of a loose network of local groups and individuals. It will be important in combatting localism and laying the groundwork for the formation of contract coalition in late '77. In some cases, however, such as the real possibility of a strike breaking out in one city, the paper would attempt to give a more direct lead in spreading action on a national basis. The paper should also strive to play the role of providing a clear analysis of what is happening to postal workers and why. This must be done to clarify our own positions and bring more of our co-workers around to the standpoint of class struggle unionism.

Up to this point, the postal workers we work with have demonstrated a willingness to follow our lead on the purpose and direction of the paper. This will probably continue, because it is unlikely that counter poles will emerge in the movement to challenge our leadership. Despite this, we will have to go out of our way to make the movement as broad-based and democratic as possible. This may require regional and national meetings, and must involve constant solicitation of feedback from the people we work with.

Our major intervention on a national scale in the next period will be organizing a rank and file caucus at the national NALC convention. While we may have observers and paper distribution at the other two conventions, we will focus on the NALC. Because of the less rigid delegate selection procedure, we have about a half dozen solid Rank and File Postal Worker supporters as delegates, plus a number of people around each of them. The rank and file caucus will be organized as well as possible before the convention, and will be consolidated at the opening of the convention in Houston. Our goal at the convention will be to wage a serious campaign around two or three key resolutions. Tentatively, they will focus on rolling back route lengths, concretizing the pledge to strike over Kokomo, and sanctioning and supporting any local job actions. We may attempt to force Sombrotto to take a stand on these resolutions, using his claim to be a "rank and file" candidate to force him to sanction a more militant program. There will be a special issue of the Rank and File Postal Worker for use at the conventions.

#### Organization of the Fraction

The postal work is for the first time emerging as a full industrial priority of the organization. This means that we will receive more regular support from the organization as a whole for our work. The responsibility of the fraction center will be to provide a general lead

lead for the local fractions and co-ordinate national interventions. The center will publish a regular fraction bulletin (twice or three times a year at first), organize regional and national meetings, and initiate general and "transitional" coverage in Workers Power.

The local fractions have recently begun to tighten up and function on a consistent, serious level. We must continue that process by establishing a clear division of responsibility and giving real fraction work to comrades who aren't in the industry. Needless to say, we must recruit more postal workers. Given the number of our present members and contacts who have solid bases, recruitment should not be difficult. We should be able to do better than the 100% growth projected for our industrial fractions as a whole. Finally, the local fractions must begin to organize WP sales and coverage in a much more thorough manner. All major postal struggles must be reported in WP, and we should solicit letters from our contacts.

---P.R.