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Revolt of the Good Guys

Remembering the 1970 US Postal Strike

David Feldmann

June 28, 2020

This March marks the 50th anniversary of the 1970 postal strike. Postal workers across the country struck the federal government for better pay and working conditions after years of stagnating wages, mistreatment by postal management, and an indifferent Congress which refused to address and resolve any of the key grievances of the nation's letter carriers employed by the U.S. Post Office Department (the predecessor to today's U.S. Postal Service). Until 1970, this dynamic seemed unlikely to change – indeed, it took the largest wildcat strike in U.S. history to make it change.

In New York City, where the strike began, despite opposition from postal management and union leaders alike, most postal workers were eligible for welfare benefits, yet Congress would not vote in favor of granting raises to the postal workforce.

Year after year, letter carriers worked for low pay in increasingly decrepit postal installations. At that time, a carrier started at an annual salary of \$6,176 and didn't reach peak pay of \$8,442 until they had twenty years on the job. In areas with high costs of living, even peak pay put postal workers below the poverty line. Beginning with carriers represented by Branch 36 in New York City,

the strike soon included over 200,000 workers in multiple postal crafts – mail handlers, clerks, and ancillary employees. As federal workers, every one of these strikers was engaged in an illegal labor stoppage and faced termination and possible imprisonment, which begs the question: Why did these workers risk everything?

This very question was asked of a letter carrier walking a picket line by a news reporter in the midst of the strike (a video clip of which can be seen in the AFL-CIO produced documentary, “The Strike At 40,” available on YouTube):

“What if what you’re doing is illegal?”

“I don’t care. Now, I know it’s against the law...if they want to put me in jail, put me in jail. But they haven’t got a jail big enough to put all of us in!”

While these straightforward words of defiance were common among the rank-and-file, union leadership was much more cautious and diplomatic. In fact, the NALC never openly called for a strike and made a point of ordering strikers back to work after the initial strike vote in NYC. Eventually, as carriers in city after city followed suit and went out on strike themselves, the real leaders of the NALC proved to be carriers themselves.

Following successful strike votes in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, Postmaster General Blount promised the heads of the NALC that demands would be considered but only if workers went back to their stations and resumed mail delivery. The response from Branch 9 workers in Minneapolis seemed to reflect the sentiment of posties nationwide: “Congress has consistently given us promises. We’re not going to work merely for more promises.”

The strike continued. More strike votes passed throughout Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, and Massachusetts. There were even rumors of strikes among other federal workers represented by AFGE and NFFE, no doubt inspired by the resolve of the postal workers. Over the next several days, workers

set up picket lines at numerous post offices. Most of these were reportedly “hard” picket lines, with non-striking workers forcefully prevented from crossing.

President Nixon told the nation that no further negotiation would occur until strikers returned to work. He even declared a national emergency and called in National Guard troops to work as scab labor at mail sorting facilities in New York. By all accounts, this was a disastrous move. Lacking basic training in mail sorting, troops were unable to process even a small fraction of mail which had accumulated in previous days. For all intents and purposes, mail delivery was halted nationwide. The stock exchange was closed.

In the face of a crippled economy and continued public support for the strikers, the striking federal workers appeared to have all the bargaining power in the world. Despite threats that union officials and shop stewards were in danger of being jailed, the official NALC leadership relented and began talks with federal authorities and postal management, even going as far as to acknowledge the legitimacy of the strikers’ demands. Herman Sandbank, Executive Vice President of NALC Branch 36, told the *NY Times*, “the membership insisted on us leading them in a strike and there was no way we could hold them back because they were right.” Eight days after it began, the federal government conceded and the postal strike ended in victory for America’s postal workers.

Soon, Congress passed the Postal Reorganization Act which transformed the Post Office Department into the semi-independent United States Postal Service, ensuring the continuation of universal service to postal customers throughout the country. The postal unions gained stronger bargaining rights though the right to strike, the very tactic which had won these gains, remained illegal. Wages and working conditions improved. Several unions consolidated to become the American Postal Workers Union but the NALC and the Mail Handlers union remained separate.

No union leaders or members were jailed for their participation in the historic and unprecedented strike. The improvements in pay, conditions and dignity on the job for postal workers in subsequent years are incalculable. Despite a massive decrease in first-class mail volume the last twenty years, the USPS continues to handle billions of packages a year in addition to letters, cards, magazines, etc. The current number of postal employees remains more than half a million strong. Were another postal strike to occur today, we can only surmise the level of public support and economic impact it would have but it's probably safe to assume that, as in 1970, it would be led by postal workers themselves.

One would hope that the militancy of yesteryear would recur, exemplified by these words spoken by a letter carrier on the picket line, "We can not take it any longer. Either they give us what we should have or we will stay out on strike until hell freezes over."

An earlier version appeared in the March 2019 NALC Branch 9 newsletter.