

US: Forty years since the national postal strike

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Forty years ago in March postal workers defied their unions, federal anti-strike laws, the military and the Nixon government to carry out the first national strike by federal employees against the United States government in history.

At its height, the 1970 Postal Strike encompassed over 200,000 workers in over 30 cities—including the major metropolitan centers of New York City, Chicago and Los Angeles—bringing the postal system to its knees and provoking a direct confrontation with the Nixon government.

The struggle was notable for the pronounced contrast between the militancy of the rank-and-file and the cowardice of their unions' leadership. At every point the union bureaucracy sought to prevent a strike, and once it did occur, to force a return to work. According to one history, "When the strike did break out the national leaders wrung their hands and protested to [Postmaster General Winton] Blount that they had not called the strike, and immediately urged the strikers to return to work." [1]

Decades of sub-standard pay and poor working conditions, along with congressional neglect of demands for satisfactory pay increases, had created the conditions for the rebellion.

Postal workers were also encouraged by the struggles of other sections of the working class. By the end of the 1960s these subsistence-wage clerks and carriers had seen many other public employees obtain wage increases through so-called "illegal strikes." Additionally, a decade of mass anti-war demonstrations, the civil rights movement, rebellions in the inner-city ghettos as well as a rising tide of labor militancy inspired them to test their strength.

The immediate trigger for the walkout, which began in New York City, was an announcement on March 12 that the House Post Office and Civil Service Committee had revealed the contents of a Nixon-supported bill which would transform the Post Office Department into an independent "Postal Authority," while retaining civil service status for postal workers, and thus the ban on strikes imposed on federal employees. It would also extend collective bargaining and grant a 5.4 percent wage increase retroactive to January.

The previous year had seen thousands of New York City postal workers participate in angry demonstrations to protest a miserly 4.1 percent increase approved by Congress, easily consumed by high inflation, which was well above 5 percent in both 1969 and 1970. In response, frustrated carriers and clerks staged spontaneous walkouts, protests and sick-outs to express their opposition.

At the beginning of 1970 a craft employee of the Post Office with 21 years of service earned a top-of-scale average of \$8,440, practically poverty level in numerous urban centers, requiring many to work second jobs. Wages were so low that "in New York City alone, [these wages] left 7 percent of the carriers on welfare of one sort or another." [2]

Further enraging postal workers, Congress had recently voted itself a whopping 41 percent pay increase while President Richard Nixon—who in February 1969 had pledged to postal workers that "better days are

coming"—proposed a six month delay in a comparability raise for all federal workers "because of the need to control and contain the inflationary spiral."

Postal workers' long-simmering anger erupted when a meeting of the 6,700 member Manhattan/Bronx Local 36 of the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC), held the same day as the announcement of March 12, learned of a proposed 5.4 percent pay increase. The rank-and-file immediately started chanting "Not enough, not enough, not enough" which transformed into "Strike, strike, strike" and then became "Strike when, strike when, strike when." [3] The membership had by this time rushed the podium demanding a strike vote.

So distant was the postal hierarchy from its membership that NALC President James Rademacher, a Nixon supporter, had worked with the administration to develop a bill which, when it was presented to his largest union local, instantly sparked a revolt. Local 36 President, Gustav Johnson was able, despite the tumult, to rule workers' demand for an immediate strike vote as unconstitutional and postpone it to March 17.

Both Rademacher and Johnson spent the next five days waging an all-out effort to undermine a "yes-strike" vote. Johnson, adopting Nixon's notorious phrase, appealed to the "silent majority" to vote no. Postal officials were described as feeling confident of a "no" vote since "Gus Johnson and his officers were in control." [4]

Gathering at the old Manhattan Center on March 17, members of Local 36 voted until 11 PM. Shortly after that the vote totals were announced with 1,555 voting yes to strike and 1,055 no against a strike.

The next day—soon after midnight by one account—picketing had begun, and by late morning 14,000 letter carriers in the Bronx, Manhattan, and Brooklyn were manning picket lines. The 25,000 member clerks union, whose strike vote was scheduled three days later, refused to cross the lines.

After the vote to strike, the union bureaucracy abruptly reversed course, with Johnson telling postal workers, "I will lead you." Johnson and the postal bureaucrats recognized that if they stood in the way of the strike they could be cast aside, with unpredictable results. Indeed, *Time* magazine quoted one NALC official as declaring "We were no longer in control." [5]

The government responded quickly and ruthlessly to the strike. Temporary restraining orders were issued by federal judges in Manhattan and Brooklyn and injunctions were served on Local 36 officials the same day the strike began. However, not only did strikers defy court orders, the strike spread across the US.

Other cities, major and minor, quickly followed New York City workers out: Boston, Cleveland, Pittsburg, Denver, San Francisco and Los Angeles. In Chicago, 3,000 carriers shouted down the union leadership's pleas to remain on the job and in overwhelming numbers voted to go out. Many others called in sick. Back in New York City the strike was 97 percent effective with letter carriers voting on March 21 to remain out and the clerks local voting to join the strike.

By March 21 Nixon ended his silence and, calling the stoppage an “illegal strike” threatened strikers, saying “we have the means to deliver the mail and we will use those means.” This was widely interpreted to imply the use of the military against the strike. The Post Office and the administration rejected any negotiations with the unions while an “illegal strike” continued.

Workers responded to Nixon’s threats by expanding the strike, with Rhode Island becoming the 14th state to join the walkout. Two days later, in an early morning vote, carriers in Chicago reaffirmed their decision to strike.

An indication of the combativeness of the working class was the response of other government workers to Nixon’s warning that he would involve the US military in the struggle. There was broad and growing support among the ranks of all federal workers to join the walkout. This possibility the union apparatus sought to stave off at all costs.

An effort to resolve the strike on March 21 failed when the rank-and-file ignored Rademacher’s entreaty to return to work for five days in order to allow for negotiators to arrive at a settlement. “Public wrath shall replace support,” he admonished his membership. The Nixon administration’s anxiety was expressed in White House Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman’s diary entry for that day. “Had to spend quite a little time on postal problem. The settlement didn’t work, because rank and file won’t go back, have rejected leaders, and now SDS types involved, at least in New York.”

On March 23, Nixon spoke on national television and radio to declare a national emergency. He ordered a military mobilization to “begin in New York City the restoration of essential mail services.” He also made it clear that a similar mobilization could be extended to other major cities.

Nixon’s order to deploy the military in America’s largest city brought the union bureaucracy to heel. In response, “NALC President Rademacher had instructed strikers to call off their picketing wherever picket lines still exist and he told them to cross picket lines if they had to in order to get back to work,” NBC newsman Chet Huntley reported.

The mood was different among workers. Strikers in Chicago jeered Nixon’s speech, and 31,000 postal workers remained out in that city alone.

With the Vietnam War still raging, Nixon’s order sent 18,500 troops into New York City in what was dubbed Operation Graphic Hand. Although the primary purpose of the mobilization was to intimidate workers, raising the specter of military dictatorship, a total of 16,836 men were assigned to mail sorting work. According to Graphic Hand documents, the military made preparations for the use of up to 115,468 men in 35 cities if the strike continued.

However, contrary to the traditional use of military units in strikes or demonstrations—as law enforcement shock troops—the troops were strictly instructed to avoid any confrontation, and that “the use of helmets, weapons, gas masks, and other equipment which might imply a civil disturbance role was ruled out.”[6] In contrast, in the Kent State tragedy only a little more than a month later, on May 4, the Ohio National Guard fired 67 rounds at unarmed students, killing four.

Fearing that use of the military in a police action, with the attendant use of violence, could spark a much wider confrontation, drawing in large sections of the working class—a similar action had provoked the May-June general strike in France two years earlier—Nixon chose to lean on the union heads to deliver a “voluntary” return to work.

The postal union hierarchy proved able—under the combined blows of the military, the courts and their own open sabotage of the walkout—to force a return to work. After enough carriers and clerks returned to allow the postmaster general to resume negotiations with a degree of credibility, the unions declared victory and increased pressure on obstinate locals to return to work.

In New York City it took a bogus announcement by Branch 36 president

Johnson that an agreement had been reached before striking postal workers there finally relinquished their picket lines on March 25. Formal negotiations between the Post Office Department and seven recognized unions began the same day.

The militancy and solidarity of postal strikers resulted in major concessions. Amnesty was conceded to all strikers. Congress approved special legislation for a 6 percent increase with the end of the strike and another eight percent in August. The contract negotiated in 1971 had a new starting wage of \$8,440, exceeding the old top-of-scale wage, while the 21 years needed to reach top level was now reduced to eight.

Yet the agreement worked out between the union heads and the federal government was a betrayal. While certain gains related to wages and conditions were realized, the unions accepted the continuation of the strike ban on federal employees and binding arbitration under a so-called “neutral” arbitrator.

Significantly, the unions dropped all opposition to “postal reform,” thus allowing the reorganization of the post office as an independent self-supported government corporation—a significant step toward privatization that was begun soon after the strike with the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970. In return for instituting collective bargaining as a principle of the Postal Service, the Post Office was abolished as a cabinet department and reorganized along the lines of a business corporation, in which public financing would be phased out in favor of self-sufficiency. In the long run, this could only be achieved through postage rate increases, reductions to “inefficiencies,” and by driving down labor costs.

This sellout agreement, in other words, created the adverse conditions that postal workers confront still today. It handcuffed postal workers by effectively denying them the right to strike and institutionalized a parasitic union apparatus bitterly opposed to any challenge to the federal government. Within one year of the strike six unions combined to form the United Postal Workers Union.

Despite the strikers’ audacity and militancy, the determination that allowed the strike to ride roughshod over the opposition of an entrenched union apparatus was ultimately unable to overcome the treachery of that same apparatus. What was lacking was a political perspective.

More than most workers’ struggles, the national postal strike of 1970 laid bare the lineup of political forces. Workers were, after all, engaged in a direct confrontation with the American state represented by a Republican president and a Democratic Congress and the judiciary. This posed the necessity for an independent political mobilization. Moreover, inflation, which was impoverishing the postal workers and the working class as a whole, was owed in large measure to the American state’s decade old war against the Vietnamese people.

Under these conditions, the postal workers’ struggle—as well as their critical control over the delivery of mail—had the potential to attract other sections of the working class, both public and private, and take on an openly political character. But to do so workers had first to break with their treacherous union leadership, which was acutely aware of the dangers posed by the strike.

The 40 years since the walkout have witnessed a persistent deterioration in the jobs and conditions of postal workers. The postal unions have made unending concessions in the privatization of various job categories. The original eight years needed to reach top scale has expanded, with ever more lower steps added and correspondingly lower wages paid to the new hires.

Postal workers are currently working harder for less money than at any time since 1972, two years after the strike. According to one study, real earnings among postal workers in 2000 were actually 7.7 percent less than they were in 1972, and 13 percent less than they were in 1978, in real terms.

Today, the US Postal Service is seeking to implement a long-standing agenda of job cuts carried through the elimination of Saturday delivery

and the ongoing closure of thousands of mail processing and other facilities and attacks on retirement and other benefits.

The sole response of the union bureaucracy has been to turn to the same agency that has studiously ignored the rampant unemployment and impoverishment of millions of workers, while handing trillions of dollars to the banks—Congress. The unions' support of the Democratic Party and the Obama administrations, whose policies are formulated by and defend the interests of the financial aristocracy, show that they proceed on every question in opposition to the most basic interests of the rank-and-file.

A new rebellion will find the postal unions as the most determined defenders of management. Independent rank-and-file organizations, linking up the struggles of private and public workers, must be built to undertake a defense of jobs, wages and working conditions on the basis of an independent political struggle for a socialist program. Such a program will repudiate the demand for "self-sufficiency" or outright privatization, and recognize the postal service, a major pillar of the economy, as an essential public service.



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