

Postal employees

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LABOR LOOKS AT THE POSTAL NEGOTIATIONS

by

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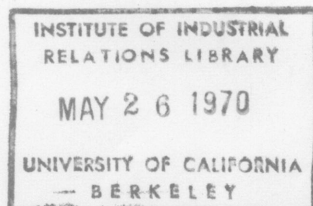
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Up until March 25th of this year, I knew just two things about Post Office. One: It was a rather fun game I enjoyed when I was young. Two: It was a place where you bought stamps and, if you put the right ones on a letter, it would get delivered -- sometimes.

The point is, I had no preconceived ideas or notions about the Post Office Department when President Meany assigned me, as his deputy, to be chairman of the union committee during the postal dispute.

To begin with, none of us had to waste time examining the complaints of the postal workers. It is no overstatement to say that I was shocked and felt a sense of shame when I learned how justified their grievances were. Every complaint about their plight and pay was completely verified.

Their wages were pitifully low -- way out of line with those in any other sector of the economy. Their advancement opportunities up the job-and-income ladder were impossibly long and drawn-out, while the ladder itself was incredibly short -- from \$6,000 a year to -- at the end of 21 years of hard work and faithful service as a public servant -- to only \$8,400 a year.

While living costs went up, all they had were wage increases. Comparability was promised but never reached. They were always at the end of the parade -- running hard but never catching up.

Then came the straw that broke the camel's back -- the reports that another wage increase was dependent upon the entire postal system being reformed and revised. For many postal workers, that broke it -- and they struck.

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It was, they felt, the only way they could present their story to the public.

President Meany, as you know, urged them to return to work, saying they had made their point, had won public sympathy and any further strike action would endanger the public good will they had won.

They went back and the negotiations began.

Precedurally, these negotiations were different from ordinary collective bargaining sessions in the private sector, in at least three ways.

First, never before had any unions met with the Executive branch of the Federal government and actually negotiated an agreement for wages, hours, and working conditions.

Another unique procedural feature was the fact that before anything else was discussed or agreed to, we agreed on a wage increase. It was a first order of business and the first agreement was that there would be an across-the-board, no-strings-attached wage increase of 6 percent.

I can't recall any other negotiations where money was agreed to first and then other issues were considered. But that's what we did -- and it worked.

A third unique characteristic may be summed up as the "Peoples Right to Know vs. The Need to Negotiate Free From Undue Outside Pressure." Closeted bargaining sessions away from public interference are not uncommon in private industry. But the postal service belongs to the people.

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Both sides had to guard closely their own internal positions. Both sides were aware that a single piece of false information carried to the workers, the public, or the Administration could wreck the entire negotiating process.

So we had a public information agreement -- all statements released would be joint statements and only agreed upon positions would be released. No speculation -- no leaks -- no guess work -- those were the orders of the day. And only two people talked -- a press officer for each party and they met the press together.

I credit a great deal of the success and calm of the negotiations to this public information agreement. The obvious benefit was that neither side resorted to cheap publicity shots nor public posturing to make gains or wring concessions at the bargaining table.

In fact, laying the ground rules for public information did much to establish mutual respect and trust between the two sides and among the negotiators.

So we negotiated and we reached and signed an historic Memorandum of Agreement between the Post Office Department and the seven unions.

I take it as a matter of pride that it was signed and announced in the AFL-CIO headquarters.

And it is greatly satisfying to note that the general wage increase of 6 percent, which went to all federal civilian employees and the military, is the largest single collective bargaining settlement in the history of the world. Five million people got a one-year raise totaling \$4½ billion.

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Now you all know the terms of the settlement. Of course, it isn't perfect. Like all give-and-take agreements, we gave when we didn't want to -- and we took less than we wanted. But, all in all, its a good package and none of us are apologizing for it.

There is one point about the package that I want to note. Under it, the workers still lack the right to strike. They are bound by the same law they broke in March. And the lesson here seems clear: an unfair law will be broken when unfair conditions press on people subject to that law.

In place of the right to strike, we wrote a method for adjudication of disputes, outside the federal government's control.

Final and binding third-party arbitration removes the age-old issue of federal paternalism. If a dispute can't be settled at the bargaining table, then justice will be sought from an objective umpire; from someone who is beholden to no one but his own conscience.

This provision should not be mistaken for compulsory arbitration. In this case the union representatives voluntarily agreed to arbitration. It was not imposed on them.

The other point worth mentioning is that the postal negotiations were a monumental first step in bringing first class citizenship to postal workers in the work place.

For years, clerks, carriers and all the others have been forced to work under and deal with second echelon people who couldn't or wouldn't make a decision and unresolved grievances, as we all know, fester and grow.

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These supervisory people now have serious management responsibilities. The President and the Postmaster General have served notice on them -- and the Congress will do so shortly -- that they want first class treatment of their workers and first rate labor relations in providing that treatment.

This is important. If the government is going to do its part to create a better, faster, and more efficient postal service for the people of this country -- and I am convinced of their good faith intention -- then it must be able to attract and hold good workers.

To do this, it must work at being an ideal employer.

In the past, the Executive branch and the Congress, too often, have forgotten that the government worker is first of all a worker. He has the same needs, drives and desires as any other workers. As a public servant he has overriding job responsibilities that many of his counterparts in the private economy do not have.

Not only this, he is a taxpayer, too.

So I believe the negotiations this spring finally achieved that first class citizenship postal workers have been denied for so long.

What is more, I believe this factor of first class status is the most significant long term result of the negotiations. It transcends even the wage increases, compression of the wage schedule, and all the other provisions.

I believe it paves the way for collective bargaining, for all federal employees.

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It is the beginning of the end of paternalism for public workers everywhere and the beginning of their right to economic self-determination.

Let me add this: No matter what these negotiations portend or promise for the future of the postal service, the absolutely essential ingredient for their success has already been demonstrated. I refer to the genuine respect for the postal personnel that the Postmaster General, Ted Klassen and their associates displayed at all times.

In final analysis, this respect and good faith bargaining helped write the agreement.

And both of these attributes are, in my mind, fundamental necessities for successful collective bargaining in either the public or the private sector.

In all this, I haven't mentioned one man who did yeoman service -- Bill Usery. Bill had a role that was as unique as the negotiations themselves. Here is a member of the Administration that is really the "company side" of the table, yet he was assigned the role of "impartial mediator."

And he did it so well that both sides called him "friend".

Bill, I don't think we could have done it without you -- and I'm sure Ted Klassen agrees.