

RAMAPO COLLEGE

Attacks on Collective
Bargaining:
Lessons from the
Metropolitcan Union of
Postal Clerks, 1937-
1962.

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Attacks on Collective Bargaining: Lessons from the Metropolitan Union of Postal Clerks: 1937-1962.

Public sector unions are the focus of today's most intensive union battles. Republican governors and legislators, and to some degree Democrats as well, are working to strip public sector unions of their right to bargain collectively, to enforce an agency fee, and to collect dues through automatic check-off systems. The recent Supreme Court Ruling *Knox vs. SEIU* which requires unions to ask permission of members before dues are allocated to political action further erodes the declining power of labor. These laws are intended to undercut union power; no one knows how they will operate in practice, but the presumption is that they will fundamentally change the character of public (and private) sector unions. One of the ways of gaining insight into what might happen in the future is to look to the past, to a time when government unions could not bargain collectively, enforce agency fees, or rely on dues check-off systems. Labor historians (McCartin; Shaffer; Slater), however, have noted that attention to trade unionism in the public sector by historians and social scientists has been minimal despite the fact that membership in trade unions is higher among government workers than it is among workers in the private sector (BLS, January 22, 2010).

This article examines the history of Local 10 of the National Federation of Post Office Clerks from the mid 1930s through the 1950s, shortly prior to the 1962 introduction of collective bargaining for federal workers. There was little hiring in the

Post Office for a decade, and then in 1937 a substantial number of people were hired. Because work in the Post Office was a secure job, and because of the high unemployment of the Great Depression, and because hiring was on the basis of test scores on an exam, many of those hired had at least some college education, and in some cases college degrees. (www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/census/half-century/tables.html).

These new hires became the backbone of the union. Over the next twenty years they built the union into a significant presence. The fact that they were prohibited from engaging in collective bargaining until 1962 effectively meant that each and every complaint about working conditions, hours etc. was pursued through direct interactions with managers and supervisors. As the union leaders of this new cohort increasingly confronted the administration, they developed confidence, new negotiating skills and a sensibility regarding political action. The collection of dues provided another opportunity for union officials to hone their abilities in persuasion. Each month, as they went around the station to collect member dues, delegates were forced to justify the employee contribution especially when post office workers were not earning the salaries that they had expected.

Background to Public Sector Unions

Union organization among local, state and federal government workers does have a venerable history. Postal workers, for example, were among the first to attempt to organize as early as 1879 (Spero, 110). There has been a long-standing controversy about whether or not government workers should be legally permitted to join trade union organizations, a controversy which is being revived by politicians anxious to curtail the

power of these organizations and the benefits of their members particularly in the areas of healthcare and pensions (NY Times, January 4, 2011. p. 1 “Strained States Turning to Laws to Curb Unions, Steven Greenhouse). Recently, Greg David, head of the CUNY Graduate Program in Journalism argued on NPR that unions in the private sector had historically been opposed to the organization of their public sector sisters and brothers. In the United States, government workers have traditionally been prohibited from using the strike as a legal weapon and in many cases, from actually engaging in collective bargaining (Slater, Spero). Ironically, it was the prohibition on the negotiation of formal collective bargaining agreements which spurred unions to develop a more politicized orientation in the public sector (Slater, 105). Their success in this arena is one of the reasons, says Gerald McEntee, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees that unions are under attack. “I see this as payback for the role we played in the 2010 elections (NY Times, January 4, 2011. 1).

Another reason provided for limiting access to collective bargaining has to do with the role played by workers in the public sector as representatives of the state itself.

During times of economic downturn, workers in the public sector have been particularly vulnerable to charges that they are overpaid, under worked and not subject to the same standards as their counterparts in the private sector. In the midst of the Great Depression, government workers were regularly subject to furloughs and reductions in working hours and benefits.

Resistance to the economy forces, however, was becoming increasingly difficult. By 1932, those who opposed them were made to appear “selfish” and “unpatriotic.” The federal employees were finally maneuvered into a position where wage reductions appeared “inevitable” so that their choice lay not between existing standards and economy reductions, but between a flat cut or a month’s

“payless furlough.” (Spero, 155).

When Roosevelt took office in 1933, government workers expected that he would not continue the policies that had resulted in a loss of pay.

Civil servant militancy was fueled when newly elected President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law the Economy Act. Passed during the first one hundred days, the legislation was designed to fulfill Roosevelt’s promise to maintain a balanced budget and to economize on governmental operations. It expanded on a similar measure passed in the waning days of Herbert Hoover’s administration; that had cut the salaries of government employees and furloughed them without pay. (Rung, 55).

Roosevelt has recently been cited as an early opponent of trade union organization among government workers. Postal workers lost salary during that time period. As one workers indicated, “Well, the problem of the 30’s during the Depression was of course the cuts in the incomes of the regulars and cutting to almost nothing the income of the subs (Epstein slide 481, p. 7)”

In 1937, in a letter to Luther Steward, president of the National Federation of Federal Employees, one of the first labor organizations to represent non-craft workers, he articulated his position:

...the process of collective bargaining, as usually understood cannot be translated into the public service. It has its distinct and insurmountable limitations when applied to public personnel management. The very nature and purposes of government make it impossible for administrative officials to represent fully or bind the employer in mutual discussions with Government employee organizations. The employer is the whole people, who speak by means of laws enacted by their representatives in Congress... Particularly, I want to emphasize my conviction that militant tactics have no place in the function of any organization of Government employees. Upon employees in the Federal service rests the obligation to serve the whole people, whose interests and welfare require orderliness and continuity in the conduct of Government activities (as cited in Rung, 109).

. The case of the development of political and organizational leadership among postal workers, particularly postal clerks, serves as a model for understanding the unique position of the government worker among those who have organized for the right to collective bargaining. In addition, attacks on the wages and benefits of government workers, I will argue, are not unique to the current economic recession, but were as indicated above, ubiquitous during the Great Depression. These assaults emanate today, I would argue, as much from a desire to weaken the power of politically powerful (and often Democratic Party friendly) labor organizations. During Roosevelt's administration, the motivation may have been more purely economic, although the ideological ambivalence about the role of collective bargaining within the public sector is likely related to a perspective on the role of the government as mediating among groups which were at odds with one another. For example, police officers might be called upon to break up a strike or picket line. Because postal government workers were prohibited from collective bargaining until 1962, changes in working conditions and compensation could only be gained through political lobbying and related actions.

Organization and Leadership of Postal Clerks

There were three general positions for which individuals could be hired in the 1930s: postal carrier; postal clerk and postmaster. Postal carriers were the largest of these. Carriers delivered the mail from household to household. Postal clerks sorted the mail by address, "boxing up," and often took turns "at the window" selling stamps to customers, dealing with packages and other requests. The postmaster was the general manager of the post office and, during the period under discussion from approximately 1936 through 1955, were appointed by the political party in power. Today, there are

about 75,000 clerks employed by the United States Postal Service and over 300,000 letter carriers (<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos344.htm#related>; <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos345.htm>). The United States Civil Service Commission did not distinguish between clerk and carriers in reporting the number of individuals who were examined and appointed in the years between 1936 and 1937. In 1936, 107, 642 people were examined and 4,403 appointed. In 1937, those figures were 245,471 and 15,583 (United States Civil Service Commission, Fifty Sixth Report, 148)...

In 1936, when the United States unemployment rate was 20% % (BLS, 2001) those working for the Postal Service considered themselves to be quite fortunate.

As one clerk indicated,

[T]he Postal Service at that time was paying \$2100.00 a year or something around \$42.00 a week. Getting a postal job at that time was like climbing Mt. Everest. (Rosner interview 1976, Moe Biller Files).

Another reiterated those sentiments.

We lived through a terrible, terrible depression and the only people who had decent jobs were the people who worked in the post office. Doctors lawyers, people with half an education went into the post office for security. Everybody else didn't have a job. They lined up in the wintertime for overcoats and soup. They sold pencils and apples and they were waiting for you on payday outside of the post office begging that you spare them a dime. And the postal employee, with his small monies, had to give to help the hungry because we were the only ones who had a job. (Ryland interview, 1976, Moe Biller Files).

In that same year, as indicated above, more than 100, 000 individuals took the qualifying examination to obtain a coveted position in the United States Postal Service (US Civil Service Commission, Washington, DC, 1940, 148).. Professionals and aspiring college students were among those who sat for the test. At that time, there was no 'passing grade,' the postal service hired the highest scoring applicants for available positions.

Many of these were so-called substitute positions which were differentiated from temporary lines. Temporary employees were hired during periods such as Christmas and other high volume mail times and were not required to pass the civil service examination as the 'subs' were required to do. Subs were generally given the worst jobs at irregular hours. Indeed the irregular hours were what drew those who intended to continue pursuing college degrees while working full-time, a luxury afforded to few. In 1940, the median level of educational attainment for United States citizens twenty-five years and older was 8.4 years (U.S. Census, Tables 1-2 <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/census/half-century/tables.html>). Only 22.7% of males graduated from high school and only 5.5% of all males in the United States attained a college degree. "...in 1936, when most of us took the examination at that time... the government was able to bring into service at the time, the cream of the intellectual crop, you might say. All kinds of people with degrees etc., but there were no jobs, so we went into the service (Harry Kamish, slide 499, p1)."

...the top of the list were all college men. I had gone to City College myself. I had not graduated because it was more important to grab this job than to finish schooling. Things were so bad at that time...(Rosner, 3-4).

Those who took the examination in 1936 were appointed to substitute positions in 1937. No examinations had been given during the prior ten year period when positions were filled by the temporary workers described above.

I don't have to tell you that the Depression sort of lowered everybody and just remember, you could ride the subway for a nickel. For a quarter you could live all day. I was a substitute clerk... at that time prior to the appointments of 1937, there had been no appointments for a period, of oh I don't know, maybe ten years or more, and most of the people who worked there were so-called temps. See, and there was quite a fight, these people felt they had gained tenure, but the people who had taken the exam and gotten off the list, felt that they were

legitimately entitled to the jobs, so it was quite a tug-of-war Harry Kamish, slide 500, p.2).

In a long series of recorded interviews, the men recount, from the vantage point of more than forty years later, what led them to seek employment with the USPS, how they became involved in the union and the immediate and long-term repercussions of that involvement. These interviews provided extensive material for the American Postal Workers Union, *Labor Struggle in the Post Office*. Precipitated by the national strike of postal workers in 1970 and his imminent retirement, Moe Biller, who had been president of the New York Metropolitan Local since 1959 and the American Postal Workers Union since 1980 (Walsh and Mangum, 141) commissioned this monograph whose purpose was to "... have an objective history written of the struggle of postal workers to form unions and deal effectively with their employer, the United States Government (Walsh and Mangum 1992, xiii).

The early organization of clerks into the National Association of Post Office Clerks and the United National Association of Post Office Clerks (UNAPOCS) included supervisors as well as clerks and was generally viewed "company union" maintaining a no conflict with management policy (Walsh and Mangum, 53-54). The National Federation of Post Office Clerks, Local 10 (The Metropolitan Postal Union), which subsequently became known as the Manhattan-Bronx Postal Union provided an alternative to the UNAPOCS.

Data

I have examined and digitized the archives of the "Guide to the American Postal Workers Union: Moe Biller Files 1930-2001 and the New York Metro Area Postal Union

Records both housed at the The Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives at New York University's Bobst Library.

The study of the New York Metro Area Postal Workers began in 1976... under the direction of Dana Schecter. For two years, Schecter met with a group of retired postal workers, trained them in oral history techniques and set them to the task of the interviewing.

The collection consists of life history oral interviews with fifteen retired officers or activists of the New York Area Metro Postal Union including Morris (Moe) Biller who went on to become the president of the national union. The interviews cover the following topics: postal service working conditions; Local 10, National Federation of Postal Clerks; organization of Postal Union of Manhattan-Bronx Clerks... and Highlights of work histories and union leadership development. (Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives, Guide to the American Postal Workers Union, Moe Biller Files, 1930-2001).

My research focuses on those members of Local 10 of the New York Metro Area Postal Union who became the founding members of what was later to become the national union representing postal workers in the United States, the American Postal Workers Union (APWU). Letter carriers and postal clerks were represented by separate organizations until 1971.

The men, who were hired during the middle years of the Great Depression, were college students aware of the social and political issues of their time. That awareness coupled with their experience as low level post office workers intensified their commitment to trade unionism and social justice. Their perspectives on union organization and collective bargaining were shaped by these experiences. Moe Biller, describes an interaction with a station superintendent.

Kelly called us over. There were twelve of us. In his New York Irish accent, he said how many of you guys went to college. About five or six of us stepped out. He said, "So you went to college, ok, skin out them cases!" Later, I learned that he meant to sweep the mail out of the cases. We didn't know what he was talking about. So, we all

looked up at him. That's what he wanted. He set us up. "You went to college and you don't know how to skin a case? Ok, I'll get a stupid letter carrier in here and he'll teach you college boys how to skin out a case!" That was my orientation. (Walsh and Mangum 1992, 58).

Similar stories were recounted by all those interviewed.

Max Epstein recalled that

Supervisors were still being promoted on a political basis. Your qualifications were irrelevant. If you did some work down at the club, whether it was licking stamps or something else, you got the job. So therefore, we had all kinds of people as our bosses. As a matter of fact, it created some peculiar situations in the main stations round our city, a man without a high school education supervised college graduate subs. If he found out that you were a college student or graduate, you were expected to get up on a table and shake out the sacks of mail which were very dusty and dirty. And then he felt, I guess, better because he could order you to do these things and you couldn't order him. (Epstein 3-4))

The oral histories provide documentation for the argument that early on, union organizers in the federal postal sector, were aware of both the need for pragmatism as well as idealism.

Rosner explains their activism, "...when we all came into the Postal Service we created a great deal of ferment to change many of the things that were abuses. (4). He goes on to explain his own commitment to the organization.

I was already hooked on the trade union movement. And I had some kind of vision of redistributing, you know, all the goods and wealth. Now I never joined a political party for example, I was never in the Communist Party and I was never in this party or that party. But I always had an ear that I listened to them with and I had some kind of understanding that the world would be great if everybody could get enough for his needs and enough for his wants and that there didn't have to be poverty. I could always understand that there was an underdog or a person that didn't have (420-21).

Epstein said that "...most of the postal clerks union is an example, *par excellence*, of a union that is grassroots in its very nature and purpose (12-1-76, 1).

Working Conditions

The work environment has historically been extremely challenging. Although postal work is often thought of as white collar work, dangerous conditions have made the job often dirty and dangerous

Bad lighting is a frequent complaint. This is important since so much postal work is done at night. ...Similar complaints have been made regarding ventilation and heating. Dust and dirt are another complaint.

Until 1953, the Postal Service in New York City utilized a system of pneumatic tubes to send the mail underground from one station to another. More than half of the City's mail was transported through this system (Cohen, 6). The tubes, while seemingly quite efficient, had to be periodically lubricated, creating hazardous conditions on the ground (Cohen, 1999). The people who were responsible for this system in the Post Office were known as 'rocketeers (Cohen, 6).

Recently I met an old friend who told me her father was once a rocketeer. In conversation with him I learned that he had spent some time working on the Pneumatic Tube System at the Bronx General Post Office. I had an old map showing the proposed tube run from Manhattan to the Bronx. He assured me that the extension to the Bronx was completed. A "swish and a thump" were his description of the sounds of the arrival and departure of a pneumatic carrier. The torpedo loading similar to that seen in a World War II, movie is how he described the Bronx tube room. He remembers that the carriers were very dirty and oily. Sometimes the bosses gave out aprons to the workers but most of the time you were told to wear dirty clothes (Cohen, 1999).

Working on the tubes was considered an unpleasant job. Union officers often undertook those jobs that were considered more difficult and dangerous.

Every tough, rotten, undesirable job, next thing you know they would get Salk or Milt Rosner out there and then after 10 guys refused to work on it, and said why pick on me? The boss would say, Salk, you go on the tubes, you work there. And then, if I were to say anything or offer any resistance, the next thing I would hear is that 'you think because you're a union delegate you can work where you want

to work. You think you can pick out your own jobs, you think you're too high and might to work over here, well you're gonna work over there. So that way, we became crack workers, because there wasn't any job assigned in Grand Central that Milt and I could do, and Church Street similarly (Rosner interview p. 10).

Clerks were also not allowed to sit down while they boxed the mail. Although they were occasionally allowed to use a rest bar.

Rest bars are---I'll try to describe it to you---in words although you have to see it. It was a platform with a vertical steel two pieces of tubing on this platform, on which there was an inclined piece of wood, on which you were able to rest your fanny, against which you would do it, and you couldn't sit on it too long, because if the boss came by and saw you too comfortable on this awkward piece which gave you back troubles most of the time, well you had to push the rest bar away and stand on your feet. That's what we had to give us a little support in those days. (Kamish, p. 7).

When one of the men attempted to improve on this, he met with a great deal of resistance from the supervisor.

I merely tried to devise a way to be a little more comfortable working on a monstrosity called a rest-bar.)). And I brought in a piece of foam rubber, merely to sit on it to make it a little easier. But when Dave Weisberg (the superintendent) came on the floor, everybody jumped and began to box mail faster. Dave Weisberg spotted the piece of rubber and ordered that I get rid of it. "Get it out of here." And, in the very nasty tone which did something to me because it was almost inhuman, he made me get rid of a piece of rubber. (Ryland, photo 80)

Postal clerks faced other difficulties in the workplace as well.

I would say the problem centered or focused, in the main, on dirty conditions, in Grand Central particularly in those early years, we worked in what was then, it had been reconstructed, it was then a former bank vault. And it had steel walls. And the only ventilation---there was no air conditioning, forget that! The ventilation came from four holes that they had in the roof somewhere, see. And there were no rest bars, they wanted you to stand on your feet and box mail for eight hours a day. And it was the dirt... And I'm surprised that more people didn't get tuberculosis under the conditions that we worked under. And then, in the wintertime, you'd have to put sacks and bags of mail on the floor so that you wouldn't stand on the cement floor when the floor got cold at night, ya know they kept opening from the transportation. The wind would blow in, it was cold as hell, you were smack up against that wall boxing flats or whatever it was, those

are the large pieces of mail in these large cases, and you'd stand on these sacks in order to keep your feet warm. (Kamish pages 7-8)

It wasn't simply challenging working conditions which created a more militant consciousness among the postal clerks, it also emerged out of their interactions with management and administration.

Management

The United States Postal Service was a spoils system in which the party in power awarded its loyal adherents with supervisory positions. Applicants were not required to have any particular qualifications nor were they given a placement examination.

Circa 1954 "competitive examinations for the selection of supervisors in post offices were developed and administered" (according to that year's annual report), but those were postal exams, not civil service exams (email communication with Jenny Lynch, Senior Research Analyst, Postal History, June 6, 2011)

There were pay-offs. For example, it was common knowledge that in order to get a supervisory position at that time, you would have to be a regular number one, but you would have to make a payment to the club and ya know... The postmaster was a political appointee. When I came to work, the postmaster was like a lord of the manor, if you know what I mean---a signor. When he walked into a post office, people trembled (Rosner,)

In 1948, Spero noted

[T]he principal grievances of the service today grow out of the politico-bureaucratic traditions of management and supervision. ...The supervisory personnel, while chosen from the service ranks, owes its advancement to political favor...the lower supervisors have frequently become, as an employee put it, 'glorified school monitors who watch for infractions of rules, bawl out employees and recommend discipline.'

Employees complain that they are obliged to work under constant hounding and

harassment. “The assumption of the foreman,’ wrote a clerk, ‘is that everybody is trying to get away with something.

Demerits are meted out for various errors and infractions. There is no hearings or adequate grievance machinery where charges and complaints against employees can be shifted. The supervisors make the charge, the ‘write-up,’ as it is called, and the disciplining authorities take their word as against the employees’ explanation in all but the rarest instances. ‘The atmosphere which reigns,’ said a clerk in New York, “is one of fear, one in which there is only one recourse-to the political club. By going to your club any ‘write-up’ can be quashed (Spero 165-166).

The highly politicized nature of the relationships helped postal clerks to recognize the significance of power differentials and their impact on the day-to-day quality of working life. The system of discipline appeared capricious and arbitrary as one of the clerks described it. “We had a system like at school, ya know, demerits. If you were a bad boy, you got demerits. If you had so many demerits, you were out of a job (Rosner,).

In order to refute the numerous charges which were regularly leveled at postal workers, especially those active in the union, members were forced to develop a keen understanding of the protocols and policies which they would later be able to use to their own advantage.

The postal workers interviewed recounted many instances in which they were charged by their supervisors with any number of infractions.

I got into trouble with a supervisor and he charged me with not doing sufficient work for the time I was there. But he did not say to me, “Hey Milt, I been watching you for two hours and you haven’t done anything here and you’ve been goofing off or loafing. And so when he came to me with the charges, I was just horrified because I couldn’t believe that he would do this to me or why, except that there was that kind of relationship between his old-line supervisors and the young fellows. He was an elderly gent... and he didn’t talk to me. He was always abusive (Rosner, 44)

He had been charged with loafing because the supervisor counted only the mail he saw in the cases where the employee had been boxing up or sorting the mail. The employee had

actually sorted seven or eight sacks of mail at that point. With the advice of a fellow clerk who was the most senior of his colleagues, and with the assistance of a shop steward from another local, Rosner successfully fought the charges and gained a new respect for the union.

When asked how he felt about his actions, Rosner responded, “..[w]ell you know it was a scary thing, but I was furious. The guy was lookin’ to take my job away. In the depression (Rosner, 46).” Arthur Ryland recounted a similar experience with a supervisor.

He was a hard man. And most people was afraid of him. He was a very, very, hard man. His own supervisors, the foremen, was afraid of Pat Mitchell. ...a new clerk... [s]at at my desk. I got the information from him, his address, and all the recording that had to be done and I was about to sign him up into the union but I was trying to tell him what the union was about, why he should be a member of the union etc. It was then that the superintendent, Paddy Mitchell himself, came out of the office, walked over to my desk, and said to this young kid who was about eighteen years old, just a young kid. He said to him, “Get up! Get out of here! Get up!” And he tore him away from my desk. The poor kid didn’t even know what had hit him. ...I got up and I walked into Paddy Mitchell’s office. [He said to him]. There isn’t a supervisor in this place who is not afraid of you. They’re all afraid of you. I am not afraid of you... Well, we had a few more words and when I came out of the office, people were applauding. And from that time on, I gained the power (Ryland, 86).

Apart from the obvious structurally based discord between supervisors and clerks, there were other issues which conspired to intensify the conflict. As indicated earlier, superintendents and foremen (who at this point were exclusively male) owed their positions to a politicized system. As Rosner explains it:

First of all, before my list and before my people came in, everything was a political appointment. If you wanted to work in the post office, you had to go to the club. If the Democrats were in power, you had to go to the Democratic Party. If the Republicans were in power, you had to go to the Republican Party. And those people were all called “temps.” But a man could

temp for ten years as long as he was in the good graces of the postal service. On the other hand, there was no such thing as a promotion. Even if you were a regular employee and came in through the Civil Service list, the only way you could get a promotion in the postal service was through the party in power, through the political club. Now you take several thousand college men, put 'em in the postal service, and a lot of their minds couldn't accept what was going on in the postal service. And for a while, it was a really rough and tumble situation. Between the old line supervisors who were political hacks, most of them and who bitterly resented the college kids.

Harry Kamish, when asked about his impressions of the supervisors in the postal service responded by saying, "You had lots of thoughts about them, you wondered how in hell they got their jobs, you know what supervisors advanced by who you knew, not how well you functioned (Kamish, 4)."

Foremen and supervisors were also actively engaged in trying to discourage union activities such as signing up new members and collecting dues. The dues check-off system was introduced in 1964.(note here about dues check-off

<http://labornotes.org/2011/03/what-happens-if-we-lose-dues-check-check-other-means>)

. They tried every trick in the book to keep me wedded to my desk because I would leave my desk to tend to business. Collect dues, it sometimes took two or three days to collect dues. But I did my job proficiently and I made time to for myself to collect dues, take care of grievances etc. etc. (Ryland, 83).

The clerks, especially those who were union activists had to constantly be on guard. "We were under constant pressure and under constant surveillance, you know. And we behaved ourselves, and we went into that before, when we said that we never asked for personal favors for ourselves (Salk, 479, p 48)." He continued,

[I]n those days we didn't have assignment by seniority selection and preference, and what the bosses would do was take the easy way out. Every tough, rotten, undesirable job, next thing you know they would get (us) out there and then after ten guys refused to work on it, and said, "[W]hy pick on me?" And then if I were to say anything or offer any resistance, the next thing I would hear is that "You think because you're a union delegate, you can work where you want to work.

You think you can pick out your own jobs, you think you're too high and mighty to work over here, well you're gonna work over there (Rosner, 10)."

Many battles were fought over granting permission to shop stewards so that they could collect dues from union members. "On paydays, I would go to my boss and say, "[H]ow about permission to go round and collect dues?" You needed permission to collect dues, which was the lifeblood of the union." "[B]ecause of our union activity, in those days we were under such strict surveillance, that with the leadership and training we had, we had to conduct ourselves with the most rigid discipline at all times. Not one iota of deviation was permitted, because it would be like an opening for an arrow right into your heart (p. 9 Charlie slide 477)."

Sources of Solidarity

The men who joined the United States Postal Service in New York City in the 1930s had much in common. They tended to be young and fairly well educated. "Teachers, lawyers, pharmacists and other highly trained individuals who could not find work in the depressed labor market, entered the Post Office... (Walsh and Magnum, 57)."

Despite the mind numbing rote work that is the act of "boxing up" for postal, clerks, many found the environment stimulating.

... the people who were active in the union, there was a different breed, While part of their mind was on the letter that was supposed to go in Box 26, the other part had to think of collecting due at that time, handling a grievance with the boss, a union meeting that had to discuss an important program for a Washington activity, and this plenty to make a person alive, active and interested in life. And not being bored.

...us younger people had a pastime that we would spend 10 to 15 minutes by sneaking off the floor. And that was ping-pong, in the days of ping-pong rage, they had a table set up, they put two tables together, string a net across it and we would swing away at ping pong...

Other workers described games of stick-ball played during furtive breaks in the day (Rosner, 480, p. 7), but always returning to their shared interest in ideas of the mind.

There was this Great Depression when people came in in '37, and we were all, almost all of us certainly, college graduates in a great majority, you know people who could read a book, intellectually gifted and fortunate that we had these expectations, and my experience in my station was they didn't really prevent us from having conversations. They were just interested in how much mail you could put away. So that we were gifted in the sense that I had no problem boxing up mail speedily and accurately and also talking, so that we would have discussions and you remember, we would discuss everything. Politics, we would read books, we would have theater, we would talk on baseball, sports, but where I worked, there was always talking of a high intellectual nature. Philosophy, we had all these discussions that were really extensions of the colleges and the backgrounds that we came from. Yes, even during the period when people tried to make believe that you know, it was disloyal to recognize that there were other philosophies in the world, other than the American philosophy. But there were discussions of them. There were discussions of politics that took place in Europe that took place anywhere else in the world. 480, p. 6 We really weren't closed minded to what was happening in the world. And I think that our group coming in was like breath of fresh air coming into the post office. We opened windows on everything and it was never boring (Rosner, 480-81, p. 6).

While most of them realized that the job itself would never be challenging, they all relished the comradery that employment in the United States Postal Service afforded them

...we were all ethnics in the sense that we had everybody and were totally and thoroughly mixed. I think that the Post Office was the greatest mixing I ever came across. Because we had everybody there, you name it. I think that it was the greatest brotherhood. And the changing of ideas and exchanging of ideas and bringing in meals from other places. Now some days we used to send somebody out in a car and one day he'd go to a Jewish restaurant and one day he'd go to Manganaro's. and one day to another place. We'd have French and everything.. Chinese. We'd bring it in. And Sunday, we'd have a big spread, always trying. something different. It was hard in the beginning, where you didn't make a living which was the biggest problem, but it was exciting (Rosner, slide 480, p. 6).

African Americans were employed in the postal service beginning in 1828 (Krislov, 10). “As early as 1928, Negroes (sic) were estimated to constitute 15 to 30 percent of postal workers in major local post offices (Kislov, cited Spero and Harris (122), 22). Echoing the sentiments expressed above, Post Office Clerk John Wesley Dobbs, an African American, was promoted and put in charge of a crew composed of European American workers. He observed that when he was “made clerk in charge there was never any ‘friction’ and they all “worked together beautifully’ (John Wesley Dobbs, Interviewed by Geneva Tonsill, manuscript, December 2, 1939, 6.)” (Put in footnote table from site indicating that African Americans were generally overrepresented relative to their proportion in the population in the postal service) (<http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/AfricanAmericanHistory/p8.html>)

It was their commitment to the union and to one another that allowed these men to continue to advocate for their fellow workers. At that time, neither shop stewards (delegates) nor union officers received any compensation for their efforts. “The union, not in the beginning, but later on when they got a little dough, they paid you for the time you had to take off from work so that they recompensed you for the money, the lost time. That’s all. But you didn’t get any salaries out of it (Kamish, p. 15 slide 515).”

Union activists also ran the risk of being labeled “unpatriotic” or communist. According to Spero, the Communist Party did exert some influence over emerging postal worker union organizations (Spero, p. 160), although he argues that by 1937, there were few remaining (Spero, p. 161). Nonetheless, at the height of the McCarthy Era, Postmaster Summerfield

In 1950, two officers of the New York local, including its President, Frank Handman, were suspended from the postal service on loyalty charges. The suspensions occurred under the Truman Executive Order relating to the Internal Security Act of 1950 that stipulated “reasonable doubt” as to the loyalty of a government employee was grounds for dismissal. After hearings, both officers were reinstated, meaning that reasonable doubt could not be proved.

Under Eisenhower, however, the reasonable doubt clause of the Executive Order was changed so that “reasonable grounds” for determining the disloyalty of a government employee was cause for dismissal. This language made it a good deal easier to discharge employees on the basis of personal associations, and hence, the phrases “guilt by association and “fellow traveler” became part of the American lexicon (Mangum, 59).

In 1955, six officers of the union were charged with disloyalty and were suspended pending investigations. FBI files of two of these indicate that as early as 1948, informants had alleged that local 10 officers were either members of the Communist Party and/or Communist sympathizers (Biller file, p 1;Ecker file, p. 1). Despite acknowledging that the charges may have been filed in retaliation for decisions made by union officers, the FBI obviously spent considerable resources to determine whether or not Communist infiltration occurred within the local but indicating that the Bureau had no desire to hinder union activities (Memorandum of November 19, 1953, Moe Biller File p. 5).

This matter should be assigned to mature agents experienced in Loyalty of Government Employees and Security of Government Security Investigations. It should be impressed upon Fitzgerald that the Bureau is not interested in union activities as such and the investigation should be handled in such a manner as to avoid the mistaken impression that the Bureau is conducting inquiry concerning the activities of this local (ibid).

Numerous individuals were interviewed regarding whether or not those under investigation had said or done anything that would lead to the conclusion that they were indeed disloyal to the United States of America. Health records, housing records, voter

registrations were examined. Neighbors, relatives, military buddies and friends were questioned (Biller File, 121 2340-5 p. 28). “On June 16, 1956, six months after their suspensions, the nine New Yorkers were reinstated, pursuant to a Supreme Court decision concerning the application of security regulations to federal employees in nonsensitive positions (Walsh and Mangum, 61). Investigations appeared to have continued until 1958 (Ecker file 1212339).

Discussion

In 1962, when President Kennedy finally signed an executive order permitting collective bargaining, the union had achieved a fairly powerful position within the labor movement. Executive Order 10988 exempted any organization:

(1) which asserts the right to strike against the Government of the United States or any agency thereof, or to assist or participate in any such strike, or which imposes a duty or obligation to conduct, assist or participate in any such strike, or (2) which advocates the overthrow of the constitutional form of Government in the United States, or (3) which discriminates with regard to the terms or conditions of membership because of race, color, creed or national origin ([John F. Kennedy: Executive Order 10988](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=58926#ixzz1RQuvFzoU)<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=58926#ixzz1RQuvFzoU>).

In the militant period of the 1950s when the percentage of union members and strike activity was at its peak, the issuance of the executive order meant that earlier proposed legislation, the Rhodes-Johnston bill, which would have provided government workers with guaranteed liberal collective bargaining rights, would never pass the legislature (McCartin, 2011, 3; Walsh and Mangum, 88; . The leadership and organizational skills developed during the 1930s through the 1950s certainly had an impact on the federal

government despite the enactment of the somewhat weaker executive order when compared with the aforementioned legislation.

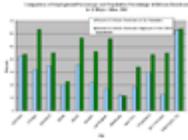
The labor militancy was further bolstered in the United States Postal Service during the 1960s by the rise of the Civil Rights and Anti-War Movements, particularly the former. African American postal workers entered the public sector in disproportionate numbers due to the loss of jobs in the industrial manufacturing sectors and the promise of a generous pension and good benefits. Many of these individuals participated in the civil rights movement in its nascent forms (cf. Rubio, 191-232). The Manhattan-Bronx Postal Union, formerly local 10, played an active role in the desegregation of locals affiliated with the National Postal Union (Rubio, 146). Arthur Ryland, one of Schecter's interviewees, and a vice-president of the local and an African American, who was also investigated during the McCarthy era, was a leader in the movement (Rubio, 146-147).

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