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United States: When the Mailmen Rebelled - The March 1970 unprecedented national strike by postal service workers

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In 1970, postal workers went on strike and provoked a national crisis for the United States government. Their rebellion holds lessons for labor today.

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For eight days in March 1970 the country was rocked by an unprecedented and shocking national strike by postal service workers. Starting in New York City, the strike spread quickly and affected thirteen states, two hundred cities and towns, two hundred thousand workers, and 671 stations across the country. This action by seemingly docile and harmless federal workers provoked a crisis so severe that President Nixon sent twenty-two thousand National Guard troops to New York City to somehow move the mail and restore order.

Time magazine concluded that the strike ". . . underscores the helplessness of government in the face of organized, even if nonviolent, lawlessness." It went on to warn that it "could set a pattern of ruinous civil service strikes." In his speech authorizing the deployment of the National Guard, Nixon went as far as to claim that, "What is at issue is the survival of a government based upon law."

The government was indeed helpless, and the postal workers achieved an overwhelming victory amid a broader political climate of protest and working-class militancy around the country. A look back at the strike is instructive for grasping the current eruption of teacher strikes, as well as the dilemmas of dealing with hostile labor law.

Roots of a Strike

Like many strikes that seem spontaneous, conditions for strong workplace action had actually been building among postal workers for some time. For one thing, the pay was abysmal. Starting salaries were \$6,176/year, and workers topped out at \$8,442/year only after twenty-one years of service. Many letter carriers had to work multiple jobs to get by or were eligible for welfare. By 1970, the annual starting salary for postal workers was 27 percent lower than for New York City sanitation workers and less than 50 percent of police and transport worker salaries.

Postal workers had no collective bargaining rights and had to rely on lobbying Congress to pass legislation giving them a pay raise. These lobbying efforts, cynically referred to as “collective begging” by some, yielded fewer and fewer results throughout the 1960s. Workers were particularly angered when Congress voted to give itself a 47 percent raise while denying them a much more modest one.

Mail sorters had to work in outdated facilities without heating or air conditioning, referred to by many as “dungeons.” Management constantly harassed employees as mail volume steadily increased throughout the 1960s. William Burrus, who would eventually become president of the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) [1], characterized the postal service as a “quasi-military place of work.”

Although banned from striking as federal workers, small numbers of postal employees began pushing the limits of the law a few years before 1970. As early as 1966 there was evidence of a worker slowdown causing a breakdown at the Chicago post office, the world’s largest. In 1969 both the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) and the National Postal Union (NPU) passed convention resolutions to explore overturning the no-strike law. Over five thousand postal workers in Manhattan and the Bronx took part in a demonstration on June 20, 1969. United Federation of Postal Clerks legislative director Patrick Nolan told Congress that postal union leaders were “sitting atop a live volcano.”

The dynamic really changed on July 1, 1969, when letter carriers and postal clerks in the Bronx staged a sick-out. When they were suspended, sixteen additional letter carriers, in the Throggs Neck Branch, also called in sick. This bold action electrified members of New York’s NALC Branch 36. It was there that rank-and-file member Vincent Sombrotto [2], who would eventually lead the great strike in 1970, got involved in the union.

At a special Branch 36 letter carriers union meeting, Sombrotto motioned to pay the suspended workers two-thirds of their salary. In a foreshadowing of things to come, all the rank-and-file members voted for the motion while the entire leadership voted against. The vote was narrowly lost, but it provided a basis for Sombrotto to develop a cadre of workers who were determined to take action. After these “mini-wildcats” a Rank-and-File Caucus was formed within the union to maintain organization among the members. Eventually they prevailed and the suspended workers were paid.

In December 1969, NALC president James Radamacher broke ranks with the other postal unions to make a deal with President Nixon for a 5.4 percent wage increase, tied to a plan to corporatize the post office. It was then that NALC Branch 36 members seriously began to talk about a strike.

The Strike Begins

A strike vote was scheduled for March 17, 1970. Over 2,600 members showed up to a rowdy and electrifying meeting. In a room swirling with chaos, Vince Sombrotto took control of the microphone and led the strike vote. It passed by a margin of five hundred.

The grievances voiced by members of NALC Branch 36 in New York were felt by postal workers across the country, who quickly responded to their daring act. In Chicago, around three thousand members of the mostly African-American Chicago NALC branch packed the union hall and voted to strike while chanting “Postal power!” The strike spread like wildfire, engulfing thirteen states and causing a major crisis for the federal government.

The wildcat strike put union leaders on the defensive and they now scrambled to keep up with

events. Elated workers were testing their power in uncharted territory. William Burrus, a rank-and-file postal worker in Cleveland at the time, called it a “carnival-like atmosphere.” Sombrotto described the “euphoria of being up against the greatest government in the world and they couldn’t do anything about it.”

There was no coordination or central planning by the union. Strikers used personal phone calls, newspaper coverage, face-to-face meetings, and portable radios to get the latest updates from around the country. And the Rank-and-File Caucus put together a platform of demands that included a full government pension, retirement after twenty years, life insurance, area wages, and the right-to-strike.

“There’s Only One Thing Worse Than a Wildcat Strike”

The effects of the strike were immediately felt by a wide range of people and institutions. A New York nursing home manager said, “I don’t think people realized how much the post office really meant until the strike.” Census questionnaires had been scheduled to go out to every family that week and had to be delayed. It was the effect on the centers of economic power, however, that really concerned the government. Checks, stock certificates and bonds could not be delivered on Wall Street. New York Stock Exchange officials considered a market shutdown.

Postal union leaders, facing enormous pressure from the government to get their members back to work, tried to negotiate a settlement acceptable to their uncontrollable members. Labor Secretary George Shultz [3] argued to NALC president James Radamacher, “There’s only one thing worse than a wildcat strike — a wildcat that succeeds.” But postal workers rejected Radamacher’s deal, which offered pay raises only after they returned to work.

Beyond the immediate economic impact of the strike, there was the subversive effect of having government employees openly defying the law and getting away with it. John Griner, who was head of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), had to intervene personally to prevent some of his locals from striking. *Time* magazine claimed the strike “demonstrates the deterioration of discipline that has become a major challenge to US society in recent years.”

On March 23, 1970 President Nixon declared a state of emergency and ordered twenty-two thousand federal troops to move the mail in New York City. The troops did little to help Nixon, as they were woefully unprepared to operate a complex postal system. Many postal workers were also in the National Guard. Soldiers openly fraternized with the workers, and some even helped in sabotaging mail processing.

Eventually, the government had to concede an overwhelming victory to the postal workers. Employees were granted an overall 14 percent wage increase, collective bargaining rights, and a formal seniority system. Instead of taking twenty-one years to reach top salary, workers could now reach top salary after eight years of service. Though the government had been pushing for the postal service to be turned into a private corporation, the Postal Reorganization Act kept it government-owned [4]. No workers were fined or jailed.

Significantly, the Rank-and-File Caucus remained active and made substantial inroads in reforming the union. In 1978, strike leader Vince Sombrotto was elected president of the Letter Carriers.

A Climate of Dissent

The Great Postal Strike of 1970 fed off a broader political climate that was rife with dissent and working-class militancy. Many strike participants cited the era's broader social movements, as well as more localized labor struggles, as inspiration for their actions. As Sombrotto put it, "authority meant nothing" to many people in the country at this time.

The movement against the Vietnam War had, of course, been gaining momentum throughout the 1960s, reaching its peak in 1970. Massive demonstrations organized by the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (the "New Mobe") showed the extent to which people were willing to openly defy their government. A fascinating appeal from "New Mobe" about the postal strike showed the potential for struggles to converge in that moment:

"It is a mockery of all human decency that a nation which spends \$30 billion on an illegal and immoral war refuses to find a pittance to provide a living wage to underpaid letter carriers. As concerned citizens we demand that you cancel war expenditures and turn from life destroying to life fulfilling efforts."

Another manifestation of militant defiance that influenced workers was the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. The strike had significant participation from black workers, since the postal service has historically been a vital source of stable employment for black communities. In 1970 around 20 percent of the postal workforce was black. In major cities like Detroit, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh 50-70 percent of the workers on strike were black. Many of them were young and recently returned from Vietnam. Black workers were especially militant during the strike, as 91,000 of the 92,265 black postal service employees were in the lowest pay grades.

The era also saw an ongoing wave of rank-and-file rebellions in private- and public-sector unions across the country [5]. Teachers, sanitation workers, and transportation workers in New York City all had gone out on illegal strikes before the postal walkout. Public-sector workers across the country were proving that with enough solidarity it was possible to break the law and win. Wildcat strikes were also taking place in industries like mining, trucking, auto, steel, and communications. The postal strike conformed to the general historical pattern of mass strikes coming in waves, rather than incrementally.

Then and Now

Today, teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, and elsewhere are showing us again that it's possible for workers to defy the law, as well as their own union leadership, and win [6]. There are many striking similarities between the (largely) successful actions teachers are taking and the Great Postal Strike of 1970.

The postal strike worked due to broad solidarity that cut through craft divisions. Letter carriers, clerks, mail handlers, and truck drivers all joined in. In many places, there was strong interracial cooperation on the picket lines. It's not surprising that the strike failed to take off in historically Jim Crow locals in the South. Postal workers also enjoyed wide public support throughout the walkout.

Equally important was the structural power that postal workers were able to leverage. Beyond the strike's disruption of everyday life, its ability to shut down Wall Street was what pushed the federal government to take the situation seriously. It's no coincidence that when Nixon sent federal troops, he prioritized New York City.

As West Virginia teachers showed

[[<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/03/west-virginias-militant-minority-->, the existence of strong workplace leaders makes a huge difference. The postal strike vote, and its spread to other locals, happened because of the organizing done through the Rank and File Caucus. Without credible and daring rank-and-file leaders like Vince Sombrotto, the strike's gains would not have been consolidated into overall union democratization and reform.

1970 also showed how the broader political environment makes a difference. Working people can take advantage of volatile political moments to dramatically shift the balance of power. When teachers today reference the Bernie Sanders campaign or general anti-Trump feeling, they are tapping into a broader political sentiment that creates space for their actions. Once the first strike was initiated and proved successful, the militant feeling showed itself to be contagious.

The Great Postal Strike of 1970 was an explosive episode in our history. It serves as a reminder of the stunning achievements that mass workplace action can win. Postal workers learned through this struggle that their most important weapons were collective action and an engaged rank and file, not smart lobbying tactics or relationships with the right politicians. Teachers and other long-embattled workforces are learning these same lessons again today.

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P.S.

• Jacobin, 05.24.2018:

<https://jacobinmag.com/2018/05/postal-strike-1970-wildcat-rank-and-file-unions>

<https://solidarity-us.org/when-the-mailmen-rebelled/>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.apwu.org>

[2] <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/17/nyregion/vincent-sombrotto-leader-of-1970-postal-strike-dies-at-89.html>

[3] <https://choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/2017/10/04/555710502/reagan-administration-secretary-of-state-reflects-on-his-tenure-and-tillersons>

[4] https://about.usps.com/publications/pub100/pub100_035.htm

[5] ESSF (article 45850), [United States: Labor and the Long Seventies](#).

[6] <http://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/03/public-sector-unions-history-west-virginia-teachers-strike>