

# Getting Together

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Vol. VIII, No. 6

P.O. Box 26229, San Francisco, CA 94126

JUNE 1977

**Layoffs, speedup, unsafe conditions**

## **Postal Service 'reorganization' increases exploitation**



Currently, the management of the U.S. Postal Service is engaged in a massive nationwide reorganization of the system as a part of a plan they have been trying to implement during the past eight years. This reorganization is severely worsening the conditions of the 500,000 postal workers throughout the U.S.

The reorganization measures being conducted under the rationale of making the postal system more "streamlined" and more "efficient." In actuality this means that the management is trying to squeeze even more from the workers, having no regard for them at all.

The postal system is run no differently than any other capitalist enterprise. One of the basic methods the capitalists use to make their enterprises more "efficient," i.e., more profitable, is to increase the exploitation of the workers. The Postal Service has done this in a number of ways.

#### Increased Work Loads

Vastly increasing the work loads is one way the Service intensifies its exploitation.

During the past eight years, the Service has eliminated over 50,000 jobs and shifted the workload of these vacated positions over to the remaining workers. Thus, many workers are required to do twice the amount of work they had to do just several years ago. For example, in some facilities many mailhandler positions are being terminated and their work given to the clerks. These clerks must then load and unload heavy mail sacks, move mail and equipment from floor to floor or area to area, as well as carry out their original task of sorting their daily load of letters and parcels.

A clerk in a large facility commented to *Getting Together*: "They hold the mail until dispatch time at the end of the night. We are sent off our mail sorting stations to work in other areas of the building until the end of the night. Then they bring us back on to our stations and expect us to work all the mail they have delayed the last two hours of the night." Many sorting clerks must now also learn and work two and sometimes three schemes (sorting assignments) when formerly they were

responsible for just one. Often times the mailhandlers are forced to work long hours of overtime if they are unable to dispatch the mail in their areas.

The reorganization is increasing the work load of postal workers not only at the big installations but also at the small local facilities. For example, 12,000 small post offices are being closed down. The workers and mail from these are transferred to larger centers, creating chaos, since these centers were not designed to handle the increased work.

The mail carriers, too, are suffering greatly increased work loads. Rather than hiring new carriers to fill vacancies, management is trying to get the remaining carriers to take up expanded delivery routes. The consequence is that mail carriers are burdened with an increasingly heavy sack of mail, resulting in a high degree of foot, back and heart problems. The proposed five-day delivery, instead of the present six, will also significantly increase the loads of the carriers, handlers, clerks and all other postal workers.

#### Dangerous Machinery

The Postal Service increases the exploitation of the workers by introducing large amounts of mechanization as part of the reorganization plan. This machinery has in no way lightened the work of the workers but instead has made it more arduous, dangerous and oppressive. Under capitalism, mechanization is always used to further the exploitation of the working class, such as by tremendously speeding

up the work of the workers as in the postal system.

The best example of this is the newly built Bulk Mail Centers (BMC). 21 of these modern centers have been built at great cost around the country to handle large parcels. These centers have already earned the reputation of having one of the highest industrial accident rates in the country.

The workers at the BMC work in a highly mechanized assembly line type situation with computers checking the amount of work done by each worker under a quota system. The quota — volume or weight of parcels — is the most important thing, and there is no concern for the workers. For example it is common to have workers injured due to sacks of parcels weighing up to 175 pounds.

As one worker put it: "Mail falls onto a slide and because of its huge size and weight, hits the rail and then jumps over smashing into me. Postal management constantly gives lip service to safety but in actuality they encourage huge parcels to be sent through the machinery which causes injury to workers who must lift it and to other workers in the building who must handle it."

Other serious injuries occur due to the dangerous equipment. The limbs of the workers are constantly threatened by the surrounding conveyor belts, rails and moving lines. In one BMC, a worker lost his toes after they were run over by a 2,000-pound parcel conveyor.

The noise level is so loud that people have to shout to their



fellow workers to be heard on the floor. This causes workers to leave the building with ringing in their ears that lasts for hours and causes some to have constant headaches.

Because the noise level is already so loud due to the machinery, to signal the starting up of the tow line (which is an automated system pulling big parcel containers around) a loud bell system is used which has a decibel level far exceeding even the government's established health and safety standards.

Most workers must constantly work in extremely dusty and dirty conditions, even in these new plants. At times it is so bad when loading or unloading trucks, one can't see because the dust is so thick.

The introduction of machinery into the old Postal Service buildings also has deteriorated the existing working conditions. In one facility, for example, management has brought in several large letter sorting machines. The old building already has poor ventilation, heating and lighting, as well as high levels of dust and noise pollution. But the large sorting machines have just worsened these conditions. The noise and heat produced by the machines has created sweatshop-like conditions in many facilities.

All of this of course has made the working conditions very hazardous to the health of the workers. This is what "efficiency" means to the capitalist class.

#### "Sub workers"

Postal Service administrators are "streamlining" the system by taking away many of the rights won in the past by postal workers. Through struggle, postal workers had won certain job security and benefit rights, including the establishment of a seniority system based upon length of time employed in the post office and the right to bid on a specific job in a designated area with regular days off. But this is true for fewer and fewer postal workers.

The administrators are doing this by hiring more and more "sub" and "casual" workers who receive none of the benefits or rights of the "permanent" workers. Casuals are temporary workers who can be hired for no

more than 189 days a year. They can be laid off at any time and for any reason. Many casuals are hired and fired year after year without ever getting any benefits or a chance to become a "permanent worker."

"Sub" or career part-time flexible workers are supposedly hired as long-term workers, but they are put on a constantly changing and part-time basis, with no assurance of steady hours or work schedules. As one sub remarked to *Getting Together*, "I never know my schedule from day to day, some weeks I might work 4 hours and the next week I'll be forced to work up to 10 hours a day. Since I have no

permanent bid position when I do work, I'm moved all over the building doing 4 or 5 different jobs without adequate training which only causes the mail to be delayed." Generally the only way to become a "permanent," though, is to labor in the "sub" category for months or even years.

The whole purpose of the "casual" and "sub" worker is to reduce costs for the management and create a workforce which can more easily be hired and fired and moved around. The result, of course, is hardship for the "casual" and "sub" worker who is actually only marginally employed.

#### Resistance

The reorganization measures are extensive and this article covers only some of the main ones. While the management of the Service urgently wants to press these changes, it faces widespread opposition from the workers. The anger of the workers is causing concern in the management. There are frequent acts of sabotage of machinery, deliberate slowdowns and other forms of resistance. Increasingly the postal workers are uniting with each other and developing an organized movement to oppose the massive "reorganization" of the system.

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