



Postal Labor's Day



In 2018 as we Bar-B-Q, parade, sun bathe , kick back or are stuck on the tour at the Post Office on this Labor Day , American postal workers have a deep labor legacy to celebrate. It is with this In mind that the following is offered.

Happy Labor Day,

Omar M. Gonzalez, Western Region Coordinator

In the early days, soon after the American Revolution , neighbors pitched in collectively to handle the mail for the community. Postal workers shared their labor to get the job done. As post offices evolved postal workers were first compensated with room and board yet eventually managed to secure a reasonable salary ranging from \$300-\$1,200 annually depending on the city they worked in. In 1825 the highest paid clerk was granted a salary of \$1,700 a year and yes he was the son of the Charleston S.C. Postmaster. (What can I say?)

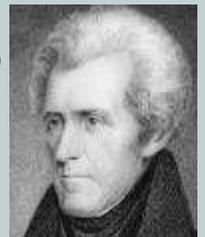


In the 1830s postal workers came to work in tall hats and the “gentlemen” were dressed to impress. But by the 1840s the railroads helped transpose these government “postal officials” into industrial workers. Postal rates dropped, volume grew, hours increased and wages were eventually cut.



Postal workers also struggled under Andrew Jackson’s “Spoils System” in that postmasters fired and hired postal workers whenever there was a change of political party or at a whim. Most postal workers could only count on a four year tenure. In 1851 when Congress passed a postal act reducing rates based on distance postal work increased and the working conditions of postal workers worsened. And volume continued to mount even more with the elimination of distance rates in 1863.

Postal workers joined with “Civil Service Reform Leagues” and interestingly enough business owners to demand a better more efficient postal service. Postal worker agitation helped establish congressional Civil Service Commission studies that led to the Pendleton Act in 1883. Ironically civil service , although it helped with tenure, made matters worse for postal workers who were now ignored by the political party in power on capitol hill. Postal workers were no longer political appointees and their voice was no longer important.



Working conditions in the post office got worse with most postal workers forced to labor 13 hour shifts with no overtime pay and work every other Sunday with no extra pay. Post office facilities were damp and dark with little or no ventilation and dirty. And so postal workers, out of frustration and anger, began to wonder why other Americans could protect themselves against abuse through organizing. “So why not postal workers”?

By 1863 there were loose associations of letter carriers. Other postal workers began to semi organize in 1884. Benevolent associations sprung up in different locations. Claims of postal union activism in 1881 were disputed as early as 1889. However, groups of postal workers fought for the 8 hour day, vacation laws, reclassification of postal jobs etc.



Activism & Loose Affiliation

The first semi organized postal worker associations began to surface in the late 1880s. The New York Post Office Clerks' Association called for a national convention to meet in Washington DC in 1890.

While the NY Association was more progressive the rest of the organization was set up in a manner not to cross the Post Office Department powers that be. In fact the association was dominated by supervisors. So great was this management domination that it led to a split in 1897 when Chicago, Pittsburg, Philadelphia and San Francisco broke away and started their own organization.

But the Chicago Clerks' Association decided to remain independent and along with the New York Association secretly joined the Knights of Labor and for a while this affiliation helped postal workers fend off ridiculous uniform rules imposed inside the dirty post offices. When the PO Dept. retaliated it was the Knights of Labor that had the fired worker restored to duty. Postal workers learned that outside assistance could help their cause even though the Knights of Labor Local 1928 was a secret society.



No Voice Leads to Affiliation

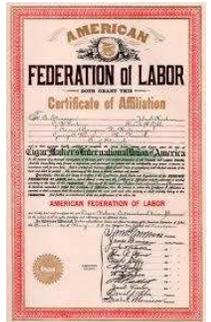
Major scandals hit the Post Office Department in the late 1890s which seemingly led to the first Postal Gag Orders of 1895. The PMG ordered that no postal worker was to visit Washington for the purpose of influencing legislation before Congress. [This Gag Order was followed more orders in 1902, 1905, 1906 and 1909]. Postal workers suffered bad working conditions and their voice was stifled by compounded gag orders.

And so it was that on a cold October morning in 1899 at the back fence of the old temporary Chicago Post Office on the Waterfront postal workers gathered and debated what to do about their troubles and tribulations. Should they seek the help of the Knights of Labor who had helped before but were diminishing in power after unsuccessful work stoppages and suppression following the Haymarket Riot? They could not go to their "official" supervisor dominated Associations. How about the AFL? That labor group had spoken up before for postal workers on employee classification right? These disgruntled postal workers, afraid for their jobs, decided to write Samuel Gompers the President of the AFL and ask to join them.



Gompers said "YES" the AFL would take them into the House of Labor. And so the postal workers began to meet weekly in a small room in Koch's German Saloon scared of what the management dominated association and the PO Dept. might do to them once they organized. And then it happened— the long awaited AFL Charter was granted and received on October 16, 1900.

Federal Union 8703 was born! The first civil servant government union in American history! Years of struggle followed with fights against unpaid OT, fine systems, layoffs and for better conditions. (Space does not permit much more). Finally in 1906 the National Federation of Post Office Clerks was formed and soon chartered. The Feds merged with other craft unions to form the APWU in 1971.



Thanks to the support of the AFL postal unionism continued to grow and the fight for better conditions and against postal management tyranny continues to this day. You will find various references to the



AFL-CIO in the National APWU Constitution a reflection of our roots in the American Labor Movement.

Motor Vehicle drivers agitated for proper wages and reclassification laws. The National Association of Post Office Chauffeurs and Mechanics began in 1923 and changed their name to the Nat'l Fed of Post Office Motor Vehicle Employees in 1939. They too merged in 1971 to form APWU.

Maintenance workers organized in 1937 as the National Association of Post Office Mechanics. Custodians organized in 1938 as the Nat'l Associations of Post Office Custodial Employees. Eventually names changed and in 1966 the National Association of Post Office & General Services Maintenance Employees was chartered by the AFL-CIO. They merged with the other unions and Special Delivery Messengers to form the American Postal Workers Union in 1971. (The **National Postal Union**, born out of a revolt at the 1958 Federation Convention eventually merged with the others to solidify the **APWU**.)

GOD BLESS OUR APWU, THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT AND THE UNITED STATES



INFO TAKEN FROM 'OUR CONSTITUTION AND HISTORY OF THE APWU' A PRESENTATION OF THE WESTERN REGION COORDINATOR. SPECIAL THANKS TO MIKE FOSTER AND IDOWU BALOGUN FOR THEIR CRAFT CONTRIBUTIONS. [cf History of NFPOC by K. Baarslag]