



American Postal Workers Union, AFL-CIO

1300 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005

Vance Zimmerman

Industrial Relations Director

202-842-4273 (Office)

202-371-0992 (Fax)

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Arbitrator Sustains APWU's Position on Clerk Craft Jurisdiction over Parcel Sorting Work

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On December 1, 2020, Arbitrator Joseph M. Sharnoff issued a decision confirming Clerk Craft jurisdiction over operation of the Small Parcel Sorting System (SPSS) machine. The Award soundly rejects arguments made by the Mail Handlers Union which claimed that Mail Handlers should be assigned all the work on the machines. The Postal Service had issued a decision in 2015 designating the Clerk Craft as the primary craft for performing the work of "singulating/separating packages & facing/feeding packages" at the induction stations on SPSS machines. Clerks also rotate to sweeping duties after performing induction station work. Mail Handlers are assigned jurisdiction over retrieving and dumping packages and transporting full containers to a staging area. When sweeping assignments are not needed to provide rotational relief for Clerks operating the machines, sweeping is assigned to Mail Handlers.

Both the APWU and the Mail Handlers filed disputes claiming jurisdiction over all work on the SPSS machines.

Arbitrator Sharnoff held that the Postal Service reasonably determined that singulating and facing duties on the SPSS "constituted significant aspects of the *distribution function* which historically and traditionally have been assigned to Clerks, as the Primary Craft"; and that the Postal Service also properly awarded sweeping duties to Clerks for rotational purposes.

The Arbitrator agreed with APWU and the Postal Service that Operation 105 in the RI-399 Guidelines, the Mechanized Parcel Sorter, provides a basis for the assignment of singulating and facing work on the SPSS machines to clerks. He observed that SPSS machines process “approximately equal amounts of first-class packages and priority packages which, as argued by the APWU, meets the definition, in RI-399...of ‘parcels...’”

The Arbitrator also agreed with the APWU that Operation 050/055 Priority Mail Distribution supports the assignment of singulating and facing the mail on SPSS machines to the Clerk Craft. He noted that “Distribution of priority mail” is Clerk work and that each of the other duties listed in Operation 050/055 are subject to the “asterisk note” which provides that “In offices where the tasks of obtaining empty equipment, obtaining unprocessed mail, loading ledges, sweeping and containerizing is an integral part of the distribution function, the entire operation is a function of the primary craft performing the distribution.”

“The Arbitrator agreed with the APWU that the work of “facing” the parcels on the SPSS, is work which is assigned exclusively to Clerks in Bulk Mail Centers, and that “[t]here is no evidence ...that Mail Handlers have been assigned to face packages on parcel sorting machines.” The Arbitrator squarely rejected the Mail Handlers’ reliance on the fact that RI-399 assigns the work of “facing” mail to Mail Handlers in Operations 010 Originating Mail Preparation (which operation does not include distribution or sortation); Operation 050/055; Operation 110-129; and Operation 180-189:

“The Arbitrator notes that the facing function assigned to the Mail Handlers in these operations has an asterisk which indicates that where the allied duties are ‘an integral function of the distribution function, the entire operation is a function of the primary craft performing the distribution.’ The Arbitrator notes that Clerk employees are assigned to the distribution function in each of those three operations.”

The Arbitrator’s decision also reconfirms the importance of an Award by Arbitrator Nicolas Zumas concerning the effect of adding OCR technology to mail processing equipment. As Arbitrator Sharnoff observed,

“The dispute before Arbitrator Zumas involved the claim by the NPMHU that the newly created position of Mail Processor using OCR/BCS technology should be assigned to the Mail Handler Craft...The APWU argues that the introduction of the OCR/BCS technology did not change the fact that machine distribution of mail is a Clerk function. The Arbitrator finds that the holding in the Zumas Award supports the Arbitrator’s finding herein that the USPS’s determination to assign the work of “singulating”/“facing” and placing the parcel on the induction belt of the SPSS was reasonable and appropriately based on relevant considerations.”

Finally, the Arbitrator denied the APWU's grievance asserting that all the sweeping work on SPSS machines must be assigned to Clerks for rotational reasons and because sweeping is an integral part of the distribution function performed by the machines. In doing so, Arbitrator Sharnoff pointed out that the APWU's arguments may be presented in other cases:

The Arbitrator notes that the issue of the proper amount of the assignment of sweeping work to Clerks for rotational purposes is subject to considerations, including the proper level of staffing on the SPSS and ergonomics involved in the Clerk work on the platforms, which matters properly are not raised or resolved in this proceeding which is limited to the resolution of jurisdictional disputes. Nothing stated herein is intended to address or to resolve such other non-jurisdictional issues.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Vance Zimmerman".

Vance Zimmerman, Industrial Relations Director

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