

Postal Collective Bargaining Serves America Well, Burrus Tells Commission

Collective bargaining has served our nation well, APWU President William Burrus told the presidential commission studying the Postal Service.

“Collective bargaining has brought 33 years of labor peace and provided for a smooth transition from manual labor to a highly automated method of mail processing,” Burrus said in testimony at a field hearing in Chicago on April 29. Since the establishment of collective bargaining rights, he noted, “postal wages have been maintained and stabilized. After an adjustment is made for inflation, real postal wages have been virtually unchanged.”

Burrus delivered his remarks at the third field hearing scheduled by the President’s Commission on the U.S. Postal Service, whose report is due July 31. This session focused on the work of the panel’s “Workforce Subcommittee,” which since January had been studying collective bargaining and dispute-resolution procedures.

The two go hand in hand, Burrus testified. “Without an effective dispute resolution mechanism, bargaining rights are illusory.”

“The most fundamental right is the right to bargain about wages and working conditions. The second is the right to a prompt and effective resolution of any dispute that may result from collective bargaining. In our industry, strikes are not permitted, so we have a right to receive an arbitrated resolution of any collective bargaining dispute.”

Other panelists included Anthony Vegliante, the Postal Service vice president for Labor Relations, the three other postal union presidents, arbitrators, and Michael Wachter, a University of Pennsylvania law school professor who has long insisted that postal workers are overpaid.

Robert Dufek, who served as the Postal Service’s representative during interest arbitration proceedings in 2001, told the commissioners that bargaining should be expanded to include pensions and retiree health-care benefits, which are currently guaranteed by law. “The Postal Service cannot find collective bargaining solutions and trade-offs in these areas,” he said, “that might offset the cost of the postal employee wage and benefit package.”

If this recommendation were to be adopted, retirement benefits and retiree health-care benefits would be vulnerable during each contract negotiation.

Stephen Goldberg, who served as the neutral arbitrator during APWU interest arbitration proceedings in 2001, urged the commissioners not to recommend changes to the collective bargaining procedure unless such changes were jointly agreed to by management and the union. Arbitrator George Fleischli, who served as the neutral arbitrator during NALC arbitration proceedings in 1999, concurred.

One of the weaknesses of the present system, Burrus said, is that “it permits managers to engage in blatant violations of the collective bargaining agreement. The resulting grievances are then deferred to the grievance-arbitration procedure, which postpones a final decision for years.” The postponements, he added, result in a large backlog of grievances awaiting arbitration.

“As a union official,” Burrus concluded, “I would have liked to have done better for the employees I represent. They are deserving of more. I am sure that postal management did not reach all of their objectives.”

“This is collective bargaining, and it is alive and well in the Postal Service.”

GAO Says Postal Officials Withheld Anthrax Information From Connecticut Workers

Postal officials in late 2001 failed to tell workers at the Wallingford (CT) processing and distribution center about the real threat of the anthrax contamination that is believed to have caused the death of a 94-year-old woman served by the facility.

In a report released last week that had been requested by Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-CT) in early 2002, the General Accounting Office concluded that officials violated federal worker safety regulations. The officials declined to release detailed testing results from December 2001 that showed that the Wallingford facility – where 1,100 postal workers are employed – had higher contamination levels than even the Washington (DC) Brentwood facility, which has been shut down since October 2001.

“It is difficult for me to fathom why postal workers were kept in the dark about this level of anthrax contamination,” Lieberman said after the GAO report was released April 21. “Postal and health officials, through their own missteps, put Wallingford employees at serious and unnecessary risk. We can only thank God that no postal employees died as a result.”

Shortly after Otilie Lundgren, of Oxford, CT, died of inhalation anthrax on Nov. 21, 2001, investigators con-

cluded that she had contracted it through her mail, which was processed at the Wallingford facility. Initial tests there came up negative, but a more extensive sampling found a concentration of 3 million anthrax spores per half a gram in one of the mail sorting machines.

Levels between 8,000 and 10,000 spores are considered harmful; the Brentwood facility had samples showing levels of 8,700 to 2 million.

Employees at Wallingford were told a month after Lundgren’s death that there were only “trace” amounts of anthrax in their facility. Officials later said that there was a “concentration of spores.”

Despite several union requests, postal officials did not release the detailed contamination report until September 2002. The report shows that the GAO came to the same conclusion the APWU did, said John Dirzius, president of the Greater Connecticut Area Local. “It shows that we were not given information for seven months that we should have been given in 15 days.”

“We are pleased that Sen. Lieberman shares our outrage,” APWU President William Burrus said. “There is no excuse for ignoring laws intended to protect workers.”

APWU Applauds Passage Of Retirement Fund Reform Act

The American Postal Workers Union hailed the passage of the Civil Service Retirement System Funding Reform Act of 2003, which was signed into law April 23.

“This is a great day for the Postal Service, its workers, and its customers” said APWU President William Burrus. “The CSRS Reform Act will help bring much-needed stability to the Postal Service.”

“The law will enable the USPS to save \$5.5 billion over the next two years,” Burrus said. “The action will help it to pay down its debt to the U.S. Treasury, and to keep postage rates stable through 2006, without affecting the benefits of current or future retirees.”

The law lowers the contribution that the Postal Service

must make to the CSRS, which pays retirement benefits to most employees hired before 1984.

Late last year, the Postal Service asked Congress to change the funding formula after the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, which oversees federal retirement programs, discovered that investment of CSRS funds had yielded higher returns than expected. If the law had not been changed, the Postal Service eventually would have over-funded the retirement system by approximately \$71 billion.

On April 8, Congress gave final approval to the CSRS measure. The APWU strongly supported the bi-partisan legislation, joining forces with other postal unions and both large mailers and small businesses.

COLA Update

An increase in the Consumer Price Index in March means that after the second month in the six-month measuring period toward the fourth Cost-Of-Living Adjustment in the National Agreement, employees have accrued an annual raise of \$415.60.

The adjustment amounts to a 20 cents per hour increase, which works out to \$16 per pay period.

The fourth COLA will be effective Sept. 6, 2003 (pay period 20-2003). The third COLA increase in the National Agreement took effect March 8, and was reflected in March 28, 2003, paychecks.

Updated pay scales were distributed in the March/April edition of *The American Postal Worker*. Pay scales also can be seen at www.apwu.org.

A Call for Activism

The union’s action plan for building community opposition to recommendations for postal “reform,” first released to APWU local presidents in late March, is being carried out by many locals from coast to coast.

Mirroring and supporting the union’s national-level efforts, the action plan calls for local and state organizations to form local coalitions in support of maintaining dependable, affordable, mail service at uniform rates for every American community – rich or poor, urban or rural. The plan also calls for each local to coordinate a letter-writing campaign, and to meet with U.S. senators and representatives in their district offices to voice the union’s concerns before the presidential commission finishes up its work in late July.

“We are encouraging our members to begin their outreach efforts immediately,” President Burrus told 200 APWU officials at the union’s President’s Conference in

St. Louis. “We cannot afford to wait until the commission releases its report.”

An action kit, first distributed at the conference in late March, contains instructions, background information, and other materials for locals to use when reaching out to other community organizations, the media, and members of Congress.

The kit – mailed to every local and state president – also contains material to use in fighting yet-to-be released USPS plans to consolidate mail-processing facilities.

To find out more about how you can help the union protect your job, see your local president.

More information about the union’s national-level efforts will appear in the May/June edition of *The American Postal Worker*; look for it in your mailbox soon.

APWU President On Ebony 100+ List

For the second consecutive year, APWU President Bill Burrus was named one of America’s 100+ Most Influential Black Americans by Ebony magazine.

In its May 2003 edition, Ebony called Burrus one of the most influential organizational leaders in the United States. Such leaders command widespread influence beyond their field, Ebony noted, and their work frequently affects the vital interests of African-Americans.

The “100+” list includes leaders in entertainment, business, religion, politics, culture, athletics, and service industries.

News Service News

During a recent update of the *News Service* bulletin mailing list, we discovered many outdated listings.

To make sure that every local and state president gets a copy and that the *News Service* is posted in work areas in a timely manner, we are asking that all future requests to change or add names to the mailing list be sent to the APWU President’s office, in care of Executive Assistant Steve Albanese.

Each request must be initiated by the local or state president, or by the president of an APWU Auxiliary.

To help prevent misdirected deliveries, we would prefer to address the bulletins to an officer’s title or to a work area, rather than to an individual.

Bulk Mail Center Conference

The Bulk Mail Center Conference is set for June 29-30 in Detroit.

The conference will be held at the Courtyard Marriott Hotel, 333 E. Jefferson Ave. The general session is scheduled to convene Sunday, June 29 at 9 a.m. The conference will end at 5 p.m. that day and on Sunday.

To preregister for the seminar, complete the form below and mail it to Maintenance Division National Representative-at-Large Gary Kloepfer. Preregistration

ends June 14; on-site registration will be held from 7 to 10 p.m. Saturday, June 28, and on Sunday from 8 to 9 a.m.

To make hotel reservations, contact the Marriott at 800-321-2211 (or 313-222-7700) and identify yourself as a participant in the American Postal Workers Union Bulk Mail Center Conference. The room rate is \$108 single or double occupancy, plus tax. To guarantee the APWU-negotiated rate, make your reservations before June 6.

BULK MAIL CENTER CONFERENCE

Detroit, MI June 29 - 30

Name _____ Social Security Number _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Title _____ Local _____

Phone (Work) _____ E-Mail (Local) _____ E-Mail (home) _____

Send this completed form and check by June 14 to: Gary Kloepfer
National Representative-At-Large
APWU Maintenance Division
1300 L St. NW, Washington, DC 20005