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## THE STRIKE THAT STUNNED THE COUNTRY

Nobody ever notices postmen somehow. Yet they have passions like other men, and even carry large bags where a small corpse can be stowed quite easily.

—G.K. Chesterton

So invisible were the docile, dependable men in gray until last week that no one noticed that their passions were about to explode into a historic and ominous strike. The first national postal stoppage in U.S. history and the largest walkout ever against the Federal Government, the postal strike almost immediately began to strangle the operation of commerce, impair Government functions and vastly inconvenience the public. It was also an acutely painful symptom of the fragility of the institutions that are crucial to the nation's orderly functioning. It could well set a new pattern of ruinous civil service strikes.

The wildcat movement erupted with such suddenness that Congress, the Administration and the leadership of seven postal unions were unable to move promptly or effectively to get the men back on their jobs. Union and Administration officials conferred in Washington at the end of last week, but the illegal strike, which started in New York City, quickly spread to surrounding areas and gradually began marching north to New England and westward across the country, hitting Akron, Buffalo, Chicago, Cleveland, Dearborn, St. Paul, Detroit, Denver and San Francisco—and many smaller communities between. By week's end the strike had either shut down or curtailed service in more than 30 major cities, and was still spreading.

Postmaster General Winton Blount could only move to lessen the strike's effects, not to end the walkout. Mail destined for affected cities was embargoed, and began piling up by the ton. Mailboxes were ordered sealed. Jailing workers or union officials, a weapon allowed by statute, promised only a tauter confrontation. A court order barring

the strike was ignored by the rank and file, who courted contempt citations.

A late-week agreement between Labor Secretary George Shultz and a group of union leaders headed by James Rademacher, head of the National Association of Letter Carriers, promised a back-to-work movement in exchange for negotiations on a wage increase. Rademacher himself sent telegrams urging strikers to abide by the agreement. "Public wrath shall replace support" if workers stay out, he warned. "Reason must prevail." But the strikers hooted down their leaders. For them, money is the crucial issue. Embittered by what they consider their subsistence-level pay (\$6,176 to start, \$8,442 after 21 years), they resisted—at least over the weekend—all attempts of the leadership to impose discipline.

#### President's Statement

Postmaster General Blount at first seemed to rule out any attempt to coerce the unions or use the National Guard or the Army to move mail. Later, the Government's attitude hardened. At week's end President Nixon broke four days of silence to vow: "I will meet my constitutional obligations to see to it that the mails will go through." He did not say how, but his statement, "We have means to deliver the mail," strongly hinted at a call-out of troops.

Themselves surprised by their newfound militancy, and having already risked their jobs and pensions by defying the federal antistrike laws, the postal workers were determined to justify the hazard by making the most of their action. "We're used to hard times," said one striker, and few of his fellow workers would disagree. Union meetings resounded with obscenities aimed at Rademacher, Richard Nixon and everyone else urging a truce. Gustave Johnson, president of the letter carriers' Manhattan Branch 36, where it all started, asked for compliance without really expecting it. "For the first time these men are standing ten feet tall instead of groveling in the dust," he said. "By this action, we have graduated from an organization to a union."

This feeling of union brotherhood became evident when postal local leaders from across the country met with Rademacher in Washington after the conference with Shultz. The local labor chiefs promised a nationwide strike unless Congress, the guardian of the postal system, committed itself to action on pay and other issues.

After just a few days of stoppage, and with parts of the system still operating, the effects of the shutdown appeared to be little short of devastating. The nation's postal system handles 270 million pieces of mail a day and moves everything from bank drafts to draft notices. Census questionnaires were scheduled to go out to every American family this week. No Government agency or business—and few individuals—could escape the impact of the mail strike. Postal service, once taken for granted, suddenly affected everyone by its absence.

The disruption visited on the New York area provided a frightening blueprint of what the rest of the country could expect if the strike lasted. The New York Post Office handles 35 million pieces of mail daily, more than all of Belgium. Many of the country's largest corporations are headquartered in the city; most depend upon the mails for conducting their business. Paychecks destined for branch offices were frozen. The strike, which was 100% effective in halting deliveries in the city, prevented banks, insurance companies and Government offices from sending out bills or receiving payments. Consolidated Edison, which disburses and receives \$3,000,000 a day, had no money coming in, none going out.

On Wall Street, checks, stock certificates, bonds and the other financial papers that are the lifeblood of the world's busiest stock exchange failed to arrive, hampering business and forcing officials of the New York Stock Exchange to consider a market shutdown if the strike continued much longer. Mail-order houses and periodicals that depend primarily on subscriptions were immediately damaged. The garment industry, which deals heavily in mail orders demanding immediate filling, was also disrupted. The telephone and telegraph became ever more valuable, but telephone facilities in New York were already taxed to capacity before the strike started. How much extra strain they could absorb was uncertain. Department stores, some of which get 85% of their accounts receivable through the mail, were cut off from their major sources of cash.

#### Enjoyable for Some

The strike also affected the lives of millions of individuals. Poet W.H. Auden fretted about his passport, which might not reach him in time for a scheduled April 1 departure for Israel. A young divorcee about to leave on vacation was upset because the strike prevented her child-support payment from reaching her on time. To others, the strike brought welcome relief from business pressures. "It's wonderful not to receive any mail," said an editor employed by a New York publishing firm. "For the first time in years, I've been able to clear my desk." Critic Dwight Macdonald lamented a missing check and a manuscript stalled somewhere in the pipeline, but he concluded: "It's really rather nice not getting any mail, particularly all the mail I get soliciting for various causes."

New York City's 1,000,000 welfare recipients, however, were unaffected by the strike—so far. Public-assistance checks were posted earlier in the month, and most were delivered just before the stoppage got under way. The Welfare Department planned to distribute future checks to the city's welfare centers for pickup there. If the strike continues, pensioners expecting Social Security payments early in April will have to do without. Other examples of the hardship caused by the strike:

> The Defense Department estimated that more than 500 tons of mail destined for U.S. military personnel and their families round the world were already tied up. One of those thus affected was Mrs. Donna Fyler, 22, a magazine

writer whose husband Peter is serving with the Air Force in Viet Nam. "Every story you read in the paper tells of his base being blown up," said she. "It was only from the letters that I knew he was alive and well." Due to meet her husband in Hawaii this week, she feared that she would not get the necessary papers if the strike continued. Worse, she says, "I wouldn't know where to meet him."

> Manhattan's Lenox Hill Hospital reported a backup in mail applications for admission to nursing homes. That forced some patients ready for discharge to remain in the hospital and prevented new patients from coming in.

> Said an elderly lady who lives at Manhattan's Beacon Hotel: "I live on my stock dividend checks and I'm expecting some right now. If this goes on for much longer, I'll just have to start dipping into my savings."

> Patients at New York's Park Terrace Nursing Home received no letters from families or friends. Said Henry W. Jacovy, manager of the home: "I don't think people realized how much the post office really meant until the strike. Yesterday one of our old people had a birthday anniversary and didn't get a single card. Usually there aren't that many cards—maybe three or four—but they mean a lot."

> Supervisory personnel at New York's General Post Office found themselves taking care of live chicks and frogs stranded by the strike.

> A Florida firm that trucks gift packages of citrus fruits to New York for mailing to save postage was unable to dispose of its merchandise. Asked what would happen to such perishable goods, William Carroll, deputy director for the New York postal region, shrugged; "It will just have to perish."

> Some 9,000 young men in the New York area got a temporary reprieve from the draft. New York's local draft boards, unable to send out their traditional greetings because of the strike, delayed physical examinations and inductions scheduled for April 5 to 20 for at least a week. This did not really rate as much of a hardship.

The strike tested the ingenuity and determination of many of those affected. Some firms, like the National Broadcasting Co., shipped their mail to areas where postmen remained on the job. Many turned to Western Union. "It's terrible," said John Blasi, assistant manager of a Times Square office, as he watched clerks who normally handle 800 telegrams a day write out the 2,000th by 11 a.m. "We can't handle it."

The strike proved to be an unexpected bonanza for a handful. Arnold Bloom, of Manhattan, who transmits documents by facsimile machines to 31 centers in the U.S. and Canada, was besieged with requests to send everything from electrocardiograms to copies of Securities and Exchange Commission rulings. One physician requested the medical records of an American hospitalized in Europe. Messenger services thrived. New York City's

Fleet Messenger Service, which normally handles 3,000 deliveries a day, had orders for 4,000 before noon on the first day of the strike. Another firm used the strike as an opportunity to go into the business of private mail delivery. It picked up more than 100,000 letters at 10¢ plus postage, trucked them out of New York and mailed them.

A New Jersey lawyer, unable to mail necessary papers to the courthouse, telephoned the judge who was handling his case and explained what he wanted to do. Then he called the opposing lawyer, who in turn called the judge to confirm receipt of the message. In Paterson, N.J., police divided up a stack of court orders and delivered them in patrol cars. "The absence of mail is vexatious," said Passaic County Judge Vincent Duffy, "but it won't stop the courts. Thank God for the telephone and the automobile."

The postal workers, of course, feel that they have been inconvenienced and deprived for years. For one thing, their salary scales are the same across the country. A letter carrier in New York, the nation's second most expensive city, gets no more than his counterpart in Butte, Mont., where living costs are lower. The workers seek a salary schedule that starts at \$8,500 and goes to a top scale of \$11,700 after five years. They also want broader retirement benefits and Government assumption of the costs of their pension plan, which now comes out of their pay.

Congress, enmeshed in both the pay question and the issue of renovating the whole postal system, displayed no interest in acting quickly.

The House Post Office and Civil Service Committee reported out a measure that provided for 98% of the postal workers a hike of 5.4% retroactive to October 1969, plus an average 6% raise for all federal employees, including the mailmen, early in 1970. The House passed the bill and sent it along to the Senate. There, according to union officials, "it was emasculated." The Senate amended it so that it provided a raise of only 4% for all federal employees earning less than \$10,000 annually. House and Senate conferees never met on the bill, and it passed into legislative limbo at the end of the congressional session.

### Pay Raises

Meanwhile, union restlessness was growing. Last July, postmen received a 4.1% pay increase as part of a two-year-old package. But the carriers and clerks, viewing their pay raise in the light of the 41% hike that Congressmen had voted for themselves the previous February, were infuriated rather than satisfied. Government employees generally were scheduled to receive another small raise this July 1. As an anti-inflation measure, however, the Nixon Administration proposed deferring that increment for six months.

Nor were postal workers placated by Nixon's plan for postal reform. The Administration was committed to a plan

developed in 1968 by a ten-man Commission on Postal Organization headed by Frederick Kappel, former board chairman of American Telephone and Telegraph Co. The plan recommended abolition of the Cabinet-rank position of Postmaster General and the creation of a Government-owned corporation with power to set postage rates with congressional approval (see box page 14).

Fearing loss of their civil service status and diminution of their leverage in Congress, the unions opposed the Kappel plan. So did a good many Congressmen, who were apprehensive that such a plan would deprive them of their patronage power. Moreover, the postal unions are the largest and most politically active civil service bloc and, though their vote power has not resulted in high wages, they still influence many Congressmen. Nixon indicated, however, that he would veto any postal-pay bill that did not include creation of a postal corporation. To resolve the impasse, he called in Rademacher and they agreed on a bill that the letter carriers could support. But other postal unions—the clerks, mail handlers and expressmen—rejected the plan, breaking the unions' once solid front and giving Congress another excuse to go slowly.

### Union Revolt

The delay drove the unions to the brink of revolt. "Those bastards took little enough time to vote themselves a 41% pay increase," said a postal worker. "Why should they take longer to give us 8%?" Stamping their feet and clapping their hands, members of Branch 36 broke up their December meeting with raucous cries of "Strike! Strike!" Their mood frightened union officials. "We were no longer in control," said Executive Vice President Herman Sandbank.

In an attempt to impress Congress with the seriousness of the situation, New York union officials traveled to Capitol Hill again last month. Said Sandbank: "We were there to convince the Congressmen and the national [union] president that we were not playing games and that there would be a strike unless we got the legislation that would satisfy [our members]." Their attempt was unsuccessful. Earlier this month, the Post Office Committee reported out still another bill providing the mailmen with a 5.4% increase retroactive to January. The men were unhappy with the amount. They were further irked by the announcement that Congress would take no action on the bill for three or four weeks. "This was the spark that set them on fire," said Sandbank.

The fire was soon out of control. An angry call for an immediate strike vote was ruled unconstitutional, and balloting on the question was put off until St. Patrick's Day. Then, as thousands of their fellow New Yorkers watched the marchers on Fifth Avenue, the letter carriers marched to the ballot boxes and voted 1,555 to 1,055 in favor of a strike. Other locals quickly followed suit. Members of the Manhattan-Bronx Postal Union chased their president, Morris Biller, off the platform when he refused to allow them to take an immediate strike vote.

The rapidly spreading walkout placed the Government in a difficult position. Dependent upon Congress for his department's funds, Blount could not have bargained with the strikers even if he had wanted to. Congress adamantly refused to legislate under the club of a strike, and many postal workers were unwilling to back down without a guarantee of congressional action.

Finally, there seemed to be some yielding. Rademacher met for 2½ hours with Secretary Shultz, and the Government agreed to begin discussions on all of the issues as soon as the men went back to work. Senator Gale McGee, chairman of the Senate Post Office Committee, agreed to consider postal pay raises as part of a general salary bill covering all federal employees, but refused to take any action while mailmen remained on strike. Said McGee: "I will not discuss any pay legislation that rewards only those workers who walk out on the American people in a wildcat strike." Rademacher was satisfied with the deal, confident that he could sell it to postal union officials.

His confidence proved unjustified. Local officers, gathered in the green-and-gold ballroom of Washington's Continental Hotel, were determined to remain out until their demands were granted. Branding the agreement a "sellout," they finally accepted it only after adding a condition of their own. If no agreement is reached on the salary question by the end of this week, Rademacher would have to call a national work stoppage.

Even that failed. In a display of impatience with both Congress and their own leadership, some 3,000 members of Chicago's N.A.L.C. Branch 11 shouted down pleas from union officers to remain on their jobs and voted overwhelmingly to strike. The resistance spread quickly. Postal units in Boston, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, Milwaukee, San Francisco and several Los Angeles suburbs voted either to continue walkouts already in effect or initiate new ones. At a tumultuous Saturday morning meeting, New York's N.A.L.C. Branch 36, which had started it all, voted almost unanimously to remain off the job.

### Strike Vote

The outcome of the vote was never in doubt. A noisy ovation greeted Branch Chief Johnson as he entered the hall. Waiting for silence, Johnson read the letter carriers the Administration's proposal, only to be interrupted by angry shouts as he explained that the strikers must go back to work before discussions could begin. "My brothers," he declared, "these are not my words. This is what has been offered." A union lawyer attempted to explain the terms of the injunction barring the walkout, but his voice was lost in the carriers' chorus of catcalls. Putting the matter to a vote, Johnson also placed himself in the forefront of his union's battle for higher wages. Said he: "Your voice is loud and clear. And I will lead you."

No less predictable was the strike vote taken by the Manhattan-Bronx Postal Union. Union members waiting to vote

in the day-long balloting raised a cheer when the N.A.L.C. decision was announced. Before the day was over, they, too, had voted to strike.

Their defiance brought a prompt response from the President. Nixon acknowledged that the postmen had legitimate grievances, but he declared that the Government would not negotiate so long as the illegal walkout continued. Though the President promised to get the mail delivered this week, he did not spell out how. But the tone of his remarks and the flurry of activity at the Pentagon left the strong impression that he would mobilize Army or National Guard units if necessary.

### Presidential Authority

Though the Supreme Court decision in the Government's 1952 seizure of the steel industry affirms the broad power of both the President and Congress to deal with strikes in private industries that affect the public welfare, the law is less clear concerning Government employees. President Truman's 1946 plan to draft striking railroad workers was never tested; the strikers went back to work before Congress could act. The President needs no authority but his own to call out either the National Guard or the Army. It is doubtful, however, if troops would be very effective. Though the Army has its own postal operation to handle mail for servicemen, few soldiers have any experience in the complex task of operating a postal system. In addition, the presence of troops, technically acting as strikebreakers, increases the possibility of violence in a strike that was peaceful in its initial phase.

The Government also applied pressure to the unions from another quarter. Shortly after the strike vote, Johnson and other officers of N.A.L.C. Branch 36 were ordered to appear in court to show cause why they should not be held in contempt of the antistrike injunction. The Government is asking that the officials be fined \$1,000 each for the first day of the strike, \$2,000 for the second and progressively increasing amounts for subsequent days. It is also asking that the union be penalized on a similar scale, its fine starting at \$10,000.

While raising many practical and legal questions, the postal strike also underscores the helplessness of government in the face of organized, even if nonviolent, lawlessness. It also points up the growing tendency on the part of individuals and special interests to press their demands despite the havoc wrought on the community, and demonstrates the deterioration of discipline that has become a major challenge to U.S. society in recent years. In spite of state and local laws forbidding such actions, strikes by public employees have spread like an epidemic throughout the nation. The Government's effectiveness—or lack of it—in halting the postal walkout could thus determine whether other federal employees decide that the way to a pay raise is through the picket lines.

The dilemma is a complex one. While postal workers—and many other public employees—are undeniably



underpaid, government's first obligation is to protect the economy and maintain essential public services. The right to strike is an important weapon in labor's arsenal. But strikes against government—whether local, state or federal—not only endanger society but also weaken popular confidence in government and ultimately degrade the government itself.

Unfortunately, nothing has been devised so far to prevent them. New York's tough Taylor Law, which provides heavy fines and jail terms for striking public employees, failed to prevent New York City's garbage collectors or schoolteachers from walking off their jobs. Ohio's law calling for the dismissal of every public employee who goes on strike has proved equally ineffective. Ohio had more than two dozen strikes—involving police, nurses, city service employees and teachers—in a recent one-year period.

Federal law is equally strict, and equally unenforceable. Chapter 73 of the Federal Code prohibits federal employees from even advocating the right to strike, but the antistrike laws are rarely invoked. "You can't jail thousands of workers," said a Post Office spokesman of last week's walkout. Indeed, most strike settlements contain provisions prohibiting the punishment of strikers. Nor, without stiffening worker resistance or running the risk of triggering a sympathy strike, can officials jail strike leaders.

What, then, can a government do to see that its laws are obeyed and essential services maintained? The answer seems to lie not in punishment but in the provision of practical alternatives to work stoppages. One obvious alternative is the adoption of realistic pay scales and desirable working conditions. Another is the development of machinery capable of preventing deteriorating government-employee relations from reaching the strike stage. Such machinery might include fact finding, mediation, conciliation and, when all else fails, compulsory arbitration that binds both the government and the union. As with other forms of protest, there must be means short of a test of raw strength to settle arguments. Most important, those means must enjoy the confidence of the workers and the public if they are to have any chance of working.

Meanwhile, the costly postal strike continued to raise havoc with the nation's economy and inconvenience its citizens. Members of the striking unions have shown that, like Chesterton's postmen, they share the same passions as other men, particularly for a decent wage. Until they go back to work, however, the corpse that they carry in their mailbags can only be that of the public interest.

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