

Postal Workers: The Last Union

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The recent attacks against the United States Postal Service (USPS) are more than signs of desperate times - a natural sunset moment for a service rendered archaic by FedEx and UPS. Rather, the Postal Service has been under constant, vicious assault for years from the right, who views this as an epic battle with the goal of finally taking down the strongest union in the country, the second largest employer in the United States (second only to Wal-Mart,) and a means to roll the country ever closer toward the abyss of privatization.

The Postal Service, which is older than the Constitution itself, stands at a precipice. If this great institution, which provides one of the oldest, most reliable services in the country, is permitted to fall and Congress kills its great union, then truly no collective bargaining rights, no worker contract, no union will be safe within the United States.

As the USPS spirals toward default, the historically uncontroversial mail service system has suddenly become a hot-button issue. It's an unlikely organization to inspire such hysteria. The Postal Service isn't paid for by taxpayer dollars, but rather fully funded by the sale of stamps. It's easy to forget what a marvel this is - that today, in 2011, one can still mail a letter clear across the country for less than 50 cents. And if the impressiveness of that feat still hasn't sunk in, attempt this brain exercise: consider what else you can buy for \$0.44.

It was only a few years ago that the USPS was considered not only stable, but thriving. The biggest volume in pieces of mail handled by the Postal Service in its 236-year history was in 2006. The second and third busiest years were in 2005 and 2007, respectively. But it was two events: one crafted during the Bush years and another supervised by House Oversight Committee Chairman Darrell Issa, that would cripple this once great institution.

Perhaps it was its booming history that first drew Congress' attention to the Postal Service in 2006 when it passed the Postal Accountability Enhancement Act (PAEA), which mandated that the Postal Service would have to fully fund retiree health benefits for future retirees. That's right. Congress was demanding universal health care coverage.

But it even went beyond that. Congress was mandating coverage for future human beings.

"It's almost hard to comprehend what they're talking about, but basically they said that the Postal Service would have to fully fund future retirees' health benefits for the next 75 years and they would have to do it within a ten-year window," says Chuck Zlatkin, political director of the New York Metro Area Postal Union.

It was an impossible order, and strangely, a task unshared by any other government service, agency, corporation or organization within the United States. The act meant that every September 30th, the USPS had to cough up \$5.5 billion to the Treasury for the pre-funding of future retirees' health benefits, meaning the Postal Service pays for employees 75 years into the future. The USPS is funding the retirement packages of people who haven't even been born yet.

The hopeless task was made even more daunting when Wall Street blew up the world's economies. It was this, and not the invention of email, that became the Postal Service's death knell. Zlatkin finds the whole "blame it on the Internet" excuse amusing. The Internet had already existed for quite a while in 2006, the USPS's busiest year, not to mention that every item purchased on Amazon and eBay - every piece of information addressed to stockholders and bank customers - still needs to be snail mailed, which is enough volume to keep the Postal Service prosperous.

"I've yet to figure out a way to mail a shirt through a computer," he chuckles.

When Wall Street's derivatives gamble blew up the country, businesses slowed their operations during the recession and, as such, the Postal Service was no longer handling historically high volumes of mail. The boom was over and the death spiral began.

At the same time, the USPS was bleeding money by overpaying into worker pension funds. An audit done by the Postal Service's Office of Inspector General came up with the figure of \$75 billion in pension overpayments. Then, the Postal Regulatory Commission, an independent agency that actually received more autonomous power under PAEA, commissioned its own independent audit. The commission placed the overpayment at \$50 billion.

Taking these figures into consideration, the projected \$9 billion deficit the USPS now faces seems like chump change that could easily be corrected with some minor accounting tweaks.

"You could actually transfer over payment from the pension funds to the healthcare retirement funds," says Zlatkin. "And it wouldn't cost taxpayers a single penny."

H.R. 1351, the United States Postal Service Pension Obligation Recalculation and Restoration Act of 2011, is a piece of legislation sponsored by Massachusetts Congressman Stephen Lynch. The act calls for the Office of Personal Management to do the definitive audit, come up with the actual figure of overpayment and then apply that to the ridiculous system of prepayment funding expenses. The Postal Service would then have that \$5.5 billion a year to use for running its services and improving mail delivery.

This would eliminate the need to terminate Saturday mail delivery service, close down mail processing centers and there would be no need to lay off 120,000 workers (the Postal Service work force has already been reduced through attrition by over 100,000 employees over the last four years).

But there are political opponents that have no desire to see the USPS survive what is, for all intents and purposes, a stupid accounting maneuver. Namely, the GOP and moderate Democrats were the players behind the PAEA, and are now the same forces peddling the narrative that the Postal Service is broke, the union too demanding and the only solution is cuts, cuts and, oh yes, more cuts.

Zlatkin says the name "Darrell Issa" like he just smelled something seriously foul. He had his first encounter with the Congressman in May soon after the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) and the Postal Service reached a collective bargaining agreement. The agreement, through givebacks that the union offered, guaranteed the Postal Service over \$4 billion in cost savings on employees over the life of a contract. At the time, Postmaster Patrick Donahoe hailed this as a victory for the Postal Service, its employees and the people they serve.

However, as the union was preparing to vote on the agreement, Issa called a hearing on the contract. The move was completely unprecedented. Here was a Republican chair of the Oversight Committee

grilling the postmaster general about an agreement (Issa called the contract too generous) upon which a union was currently voting. "Talk about tampering with elections," says Zlatkin.

For Zlatkin, the only other name that inspires as much contempt is Dennis Ross (R-Florida), another member of the Oversight Committee. "Issa's henchman," as Zlatkin calls him, went after the postmaster for settling on the agreement, demanding to know why he didn't negotiate the contract.

"The bigger issue is really the longer-term changes we need to make to the Postal Service in terms of its viability," Ross said to Donahoe. "I hope we can empower you to do more."

Side note: It's interesting to hear the GOP refer to the Postal Service as if it's a business rather than an entity that provides a public service. The Postal Service is not designed to churn profits.

What empower meant was to starve the Postal Service and its union. Since that day, Donahoe has abdicated his responsibility as the postmaster general, according to Zlatkin. The APWU's collective bargaining agreements in the past have included layoff protections, which Donahoe immediately offered up as sacrifice to his Republican masters when he asked to bypass worker protection so he might obliterate 220,000 career positions from the workforce by 2015.

"All he's trying to do is appease that committee. He's violated a contract he's signed. He's violated labor law. From my understanding, by going to Congress and having them change the laws to change our contracts, he's violating the Constitution of the United States."

In fact, Zlatkin says his local union chapter is so disillusioned with the postmaster's behavior that they're putting out a press release to call for his resignation or termination. "He is either a well-meaning incompetent or a duplicitous front man for the people who want to privatize the postal service," says Zlatkin.

Soon after meeting with Donahoe, Issa introduced the Postal Reform Act to Congress, a bill that Zlatkin says would "Wisconsin" the Postal Service. "[The bill would] give them the kinds of powers that the Super Committee is having to just go in there temporarily and do what has to be done: rip into the contracts, close post offices without hearings. It's basically the Postal Service Destruction Act." The bill has one co-sponsor: Dennis Ross. And both men just happen to be in charge of the House Oversight Committee. Between the "Save The Postal Service" H.R. 1351 and the Postal Service Destruction Act, Zlatkin asks rhetorically, "which is gonna come to a vote?"

It makes sense that the Postal Service has become the target of rich, overwhelmingly white politicians. As former Deputy Assistant and Deputy Press Secretary to former President George W.

Bush, Tony Fratto so eloquently tweeted: "Over the past 10 yrs I might have visited a post office 10 times, total."

When you can hand off parcels to your assistant who then ships it off at FedEx's higher rates, then yeah, the post office might not be for you. But as Marcy Wheeler explains, there are still tons of **people** who need the USPS's services: poorer people, people using a post office box, rural people who live outside delivery areas, eBay-type entrepreneurs, immigrants sending care packages to people from their country of origin and nonprofits.

"It's part of the class war and it's against the poor and it's a class war against working people," says Zlatkin. Of the 34 post offices the USPS is considering closing in New York City, 17 are in the Bronx. The South Bronx district ranks as the poorest Congressional district in America.

"Any time a post office is rumored to be closing, it's devastating to the neighborhood that it's in," says Zlatkin, "what happens when we get involved with elected officials and community people to try and keep a post office open, it's always the same people who turn out: elderly people, disabled people, poor people and small business owners. They're the people who are the ones who that depend on the postal service that they can't really afford or have access to alternatives."

UPS and FedEx aren't required to do what the Postal Service does and that is deliver the mail to every place, even if the recipient is located in hard-to-reach rural terrain, or an inner-city neighborhood deemed too "dangerous" for other services, like taxi cabs, in which to travel. If the USPS falls, it will be another strike in the class war where poor people are yet again cut off from a service that used to belong to everyone.

So, here we have a service that caters primarily to the economically disadvantaged and employs over 574,000 union members. No wonder it became such a mouth-watering target for the GOP. It would be quite a feather in the cap of Darrell "the liberal hunter" Issa to take out one of the largest unions in the country and simultaneously give the US a nudge in the direction of total privatization by crippling one of the last great public services.

"Obama is gonna have a job talk for the country," says Zlatkin. "Is he gonna talk about the necessity for maintaining the 120,000 postal jobs, or is he going to ignore it? I would guess he would ignore it. We were the second union to endorse Obama, the APWU and since that time, he hasn't been a, what we call, good friend to the postal workers, or the people they work for."

Chuck Zlatkin discusses the destruction of the Postal Service with Thom Hartmann