

Clerk vs. Mail Handler: Jurisdictional Disputes in the Postal Service

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CRAFT ASSIGNMENT of clerks and mail handlers has been a major labor relations issue in the U. S. Postal Service. Craft differentiation of postal employees is imbedded in the nature of mail processing and is similar to craft divisions throughout American industry. It poses serious labor relations problems for postal management and postal unions.

In 1955, Congress established standards for key positions and pay levels of postal employees in the Postal Field Service Classification Act. Under the Act, the Postmaster General defined "... various positions other than the key positions... assigned each position to its appropriate salary level in the Postal Field Service... by ranking the position to the key position most closely comparable in terms of the level of duties, responsibilities and work requirements from PS-1 to PS-6."¹

In short, he filled in the postal field service classification and pay plans according to the standards set down by Congress.

The distinctive duties of the letter carrier, the maintenance-custodial man, and the motor vehicle operator were clear enough. From the beginning, however, the duties of clerks and mail handlers overlapped and their craft assignment posed serious classification and labor relations problems.

In 1955, E. C. Hallbeck, President of the former National Federation of Post Office Clerks, NFPOC-AFL-CIO, testified before a Congressional Committee in hearings on the proposed Postal Field Service Classification Act. He said:

"... I am sure that some of the members of the committee who have served a number of years will remember one of the things that

¹ P. L. 68, 84th Congress, 1955.

bothered us most in 1949... was the arbitrary assignment of mail handlers to clerical duties. That is a problem we have all the time....

"... We bring it to the attention of the Department every time we catch up with it and the Department stops it.... In most cases where they are using them every day of the week... that is what we object to. No one I know of objects to something which is temporary in an emergency situation. I have never known a postal office employee worth his salt who would object to a real emergency situation...."²

Mr. Hallbeck's concern over craft assignment and the growing major jurisdictional dispute between clerk unions and mail handler's unions was voiced.

The critical question is the distinction between *distribution by sorting*, a clerk's job—requiring the memorization of changing schemes for piece processing of mail—and *distribution by bulk movement*, a mail handler's job—requiring manual strength and dexterity for conveying sacks and heavy loads. As will be seen, this distinction, always in dispute, has become increasingly blurred.³

In response to the changing technology and operational methods of the Postal Service since 1960, the Postmaster General created new "distribution" positions and designated them in the appropriate craft. To what craft would employees be assigned and who would represent them?

The answers to these questions are related to the changing power configuration of the postal unions and to the developing technology of mail processing in the past ten years.

Craft Assignment and Power Struggles

During the 1960s, several factors sharpened the conflict between the skilled clerks and the relatively unskilled mail handlers and opened up a unique organizational opportunity for the Laborers' International Union (LIUNA), a newcomer to postal labor relations. These were the reaffirmation of craft allegiance among postal unions in the 1971 merger, the decline in the private sector of the demand for common labor, and the modernization program of the postal service which changed the composition of skills in the postal work force and affected all the inside crafts: maintenance, clerk and mail handler.⁴

In 1971, five postal unions merged to form the American Postal Workers Union, APWU-AFL-CIO. They were the United Federation of Postal Clerks (UFPC), the National Association of Special Delivery Messengers, the National Association of Post Office and General Service Maintenance Employees, and the National Postal Union (NPU). The merger closed the schism among organizations of inside postal employees which occurred in 1958. The progressive wing of the clerks' union had broken away from the former National Federation of

² U.S. Congress, House Committee of Post Office and Civil Service, *Hearings of Postal Pay and Classification*, 84th Congress, 1st Session, February, 1955, pp. 208-9.

³ The distinction between clerk's work and mail-handler's work was the basis for the awards of three arbitrators in resolving disputes over craft assignment: Samuel H. Jaffee in USPOD, NAPOMH, UFPC & NPU, 268-PO-9, Advisory Opinion, June

15, 1970; Thompson Powers in USPOD, UFPC, & NAPOMH, 242-PO-9, Advisory Arbitration, November 8, 1971 and Sylvester Garrett in USPS, LIUNA & APWU, AW-NAT-5753, A-NAT-2964 and A-NAT-5750, April 2, 1975.

⁴ Edward A. Blomstedt, *The Impact of Technology Upon Postal Labor Relations*, Unpublished MBA Thesis, Drexel University, Phila., Pa., 1975 pp. 90-95.

Post Office Clerks, predecessor to UFPC, over representation in the national convention. Forming the National Postal Union (NPU), this faction contended that convention representation was stacked in favor of the incumbent, rural, conservative, largely white, craft oriented leadership and against the urban, polyglot, industrial, liberal minority.⁵

Between 1962 and 1971, under the Federal Executive Orders, the NPU secured exclusive recognition at the installation level for all crafts, including mail handlers in the large city post offices. It bridged the gap between the largely white, skilled clerks and the largely black, semi-skilled and unskilled motor vehicle operators, mail handlers and maintenance men who dominated the urban postal work force. NPU established for the first time a racially integrated, industrial union in the postal service. Nevertheless, the NPU failed to obtain national exclusive bargaining rights although total membership at its peak (80,000) far exceeded the membership of several smaller craft unions—including the mail handlers association—to which the Post Office Department accorded national bargaining rights.

Enter LIUNA

After 1968, in the last days of the Post Office Department, of the jurisdiction of the Federal Executive Orders over postal labor relations, and of the postal union schism, the National Association of Post Office Mail Handlers, NAPOMH, one of the smallest postal unions with national bargaining rights, foresaw increasing difficulty in servicing its scattered 35,000

members and enrolling unorganized mail handlers. It arranged a merger with LIUNA. Despite second thoughts on the part of the older mail handler leaders, several court challenges, and an abortive NPU attempt in 1970 to secure exclusive bargaining rights, that merger has held up. It introduced a new actor into postal labor relations, LIUNA, which succeeded to NAPOMH bargaining rights.

LIUNA's traditional base in the private sector was among minority, unskilled common laborers. To halt the erosion of its membership resulting from the decline in the demand for common labor in private industry, LIUNA looked to the postal service where, ironically, modernization had increased unskilled mail handler jobs at the expense of skilled clerk jobs.

In 1970, the Postal Reorganization Act reaffirmed the traditional postal craft as the appropriate unit for recognition and representation. Bowing to irresistible pressure, the NPU subordinated its commitment to an industrial organization and merged with the UFPC and the three other smaller craft unions to form the APWU, a "craft conglomerate."⁶

Under the Postal Reorganization Act, the U. S. Postal Service, an independent, non-profit, government agency, succeeded the Post Office Department. It recognized the APWU as national exclusive representative for maintenance employees, special delivery messengers, motor vehicle employees and postal clerks. The NALC and the NRLCA were recognized as exclusive representatives for letter carriers and for rural letter carriers respectively; the Mail Handlers Division/LIUNA was recognized

⁵ Harriet F. Berger, *Exclusive Recognition in the Public Service*, Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, Phila., Pa., 1967, p. 82.

⁶ So called by Mr. Moe Biller, President, Metro Area Postal Union, in *The American Postal Worker*, July, 1975, p. 21.

as exclusive representative for mail handlers.⁷

The union merger was not without its price. Although APWU retained bargaining rights for four major postal crafts, it lost the mail handler craft to LIUNA. This reflected the persistence of craft thinking in the newly organized APWU and its alienation from the predominantly black, semi-skilled and unskilled mail handlers.

Modernization and More Mail Handler Jobs

Clerks and mail handlers have always worked side-by-side in the larger post offices. Their duties have overlapped and the clerks have not prevented the mail handlers from encroaching on *their* work. In the smaller post offices, the base of clerk craft strength, mail processing does not justify a separate mail handler position. In the larger centers, however, the volume of work requires greater differentiation of skills in the employment of hundreds and sometimes thousands of clerks and mail handlers.

Modernization has embraced several elements, among them the ZIP code and mail processing machinery. These changed the composition of skills and the postal work force, increased mail handler tasks at the expense of clerk work and sharpened the latent, but ever-present, jurisdictional conflict between clerk and mail handler organizations.

Introduced in 1963, ZIP code is a five-digit code which identifies every individual post office and metropolitan area delivery station for dispatch of mail from any point in the United States. By giving offices in a certain

section of each state the same first three digits, the Postal Service divides the country into over seven hundred ZIP Code Areas.

Clerks now sort ZIP-coded letters by these first three digits rather than by remembering the locations and available transportation to those post offices. This reduces the skill requirements of many postal clerks. With limited training, new clerks and *even mail handlers* sort mail "by the numbers." Where such simple separation is the only requirement in mail processing, mail handlers can perform the work at a lower job level and pay rate than a clerk.

Since 1963, the Postal Service has rapidly introduced letter sorting machines, sack sorting machines and parcel sorting machines to aid clerks and mail handlers in their processing functions. In the later stages of development, the machines have utilized the ZIP code on a piece of mail in the sortation process. A clerk or mail handler reads the ZIP code on a piece of mail, enters all or part of the number on a keyboard and a conveyor whisks away the letter, parcel or sack to a container for the proper destination.

The combination of ZIP code and mechanized sortation has blurred the distinction between the traditional functions of sortation and mail handling. The computer remembers how to sort the mail when given the ZIP code and controls the machine in achieving that sort. Is the human element of keypunching the ZIP code sortation or mail handling? Should a clerk or mail handler perform the function?

⁷ The latest reports show the membership of these unions as follows:
APWU: 295,000; NALC: 200,000;
NRLCA, 50,000 Mail handlers/
LIUNA: 35,000 (est.)

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Labor,
Directory of National Unions and Associations, 1972.

TABLE I

Operator Job Categories for Postal Mechanization

<i>MACHINE/JOB</i>	<i>CRAFT/LEVEL</i>	<i>DESCRIPTION</i>
<i>Letter Sorting Machine</i>		
Distribution clerk, Machine	Clerk, PS-6*	Keys ZIP code and/or special machine code based on scheme
<i>Parcel Post Machines</i>		
Parcel Post Distributor, Machine	Clerk, PS-5	Sorts parcels using ZIP code on parcel
<i>Sack Sorting Machines</i>		
Sack Sorting Machine Operator	Clerk, PS-6	Keys machine codes based on established schemes
Sack Sorting Machine Operator	Mail handler, PS-4	Keys ZIP code or other code based on simple alphabetical scheme, non-preferential mail only.
Sack Sorting Machine Operator	Mail handler, PS-5	Keys machine codes to accomplish distribution other than by ZIP code, alphabetical or geo- graphic distribution.

* In the 1975 National Agreement management agreed to promote all letter sorting machine operators to Level PS-6.

Source: U. S. Postal Service, "Position Descriptions, *Personnel Handbook* P-1, 1975.

Clerks received all assignments on letter sorting machines but no overall decision was made on parcel or sack sorting machines—the multi-slide sack and parcel sorters and the power driven sack and parcel sorters.

Who Gets What?

In November, 1971, postal management and LIUNA concluded a supplementary understanding on mail-handler craft assignments:

"... In all first class offices with 25 or more employees and other large

customer service and mail processing facilities, employees other than mail handlers may be performing full-time duties within the mail handling bargaining unit on a regularly scheduled basis; therefore, the Employer will review the practices in these installations...

"... Where it is found that employees have duty assignments on a regular basis which are comprised of all mail handler duties those duty assignments will be delegated to the mail handler craft..."⁸

⁸ Memorandum of Understanding between the USPS and APWU, LIUNA, NALC and NRLCA, Sept. 4, 1975 appended to Training

Guide of the 1975-8 Agreement, July 21, 1975, p. 138.

Armed with this "hunting license," LIUNA succeeded through lower level grievances in dislodging clerk operators from machines in three major cities.

The disputes involved craft assignment of the "crows nest" distributor on an Oakland, California, multi-slide parcel sorter; craft assignment of a "keyer" on the mechanized sack sorter in San Francisco; and all positions on a set of multi-slide parcel sorters in Seattle. Appeals by the APWU brought a reversal from Postal Service Headquarters. Top postal management ruled on May 31, 1974, that in the first instance (Oakland), scheme knowledge—a clerk skill—was involved. In the second instance (San Francisco), preferential mail was routed—a clerk duty. Finally, in the third case (Seattle), the operators were engaged exclusively in mail distribution—a clerk function. These three rulings are collectively known as the Sullivan Award.

The Postal Service, the APWU, and LIUNA agreed to submit three machine operator assignment disputes to impartial arbitration. Arbitrator Sylvester Garrett reviewed the claims of all parties and awarded the positions in each case to the clerks, though not for the rationale behind the Sullivan Award:

"... the critical issue here is whether the provisions of a subsequent understanding between the LIUNA and postal management can be effectuated at the expense of the jurisdiction of another recognized national craft unit [the APWU, which was not party to LIUNA's supplementary agreement]."⁹

On April 2, 1976, Garrett found that the intent of the National Agreement was to protect the fundamental

positions of existing craft divisions as of the 1971 National Agreement. The transfers sought and initially achieved by the mail-handlers were not consistent with the letter or the spirit of the National Agreement.

The Garrett Award intensified the dispute between LIUNA and APWU. To protest the unfavorable ruling, LIUNA walked out of national negotiations for a new National Agreement which began shortly after the award came down. LIUNA negotiators stayed out for two and one-half weeks and did not come back until they had secured a commitment for the appointment of a standing national level Committee on Jurisdiction to resolve current and future jurisdictional disputes between APWU and LIUNA over the assignment of positions defined by the 1955 Classification Act. Disputes over new positions, those yet to be established, are resolved by the procedure set forth in ART. I, Sec. 5 and ART. XV of the National Postal Agreement.

The Memorandum of Understanding establishing the Committee on Jurisdiction provides for membership on the Committee of four postal unions, NALC, APWU, LIUNA and NRLCA, and of Postal Service management.¹⁰ Each union files with the Committee a written description of the scope of duties properly assignable to the employees it represents. The Committee is to resolve disputes over conflicting claims of jurisdiction. It will consider existing work assignment practices, manpower costs, avoidance of duplication of effort and "make work" assignments, effective utilization of manpower including the Postal Service's need to assign employees across craft lines on a temporary

⁹ Sylvester Garrett, Opinion and Award on Grievances AW-NAT-5753, A-NAT-2964, and A-NAT-5750, April 2, 1975, p. 46.

¹⁰ Effective September 4, 1975.

basis, the integral nature of all duties which comprise a normal duty assignment, and the contractual and legal obligations and requirements of the parties.

Upon agreement of the parties to the dispute, management will modify craft jurisdiction on the national level, including revision of positions descriptions and craft assignments. Where the parties do not agree, resolution of the dispute is secured through arbitration as provided in ART. XV of the National Agreement.

The Future

Thus far, pursuant to the Memorandum of Understanding, the APWU has submitted its identification of duty assignments to the National Committee on Jurisdiction. LIUNA has not followed suit although it was the prime mover in the establishment of the Committee. LIUNA's failure to exploit this avenue reflects recent developments and future trends in postal mechanization which may have rendered the jurisdictional dispute over sorting machines moot.

In the past year, there has been such an enormous change in bulk mail processing throughout the country that both clerks and mail handlers have temporarily forgotten their disputes. Between February, 1975, and February, 1976, the Postal Service activated the National Bulk Mail System, twenty-one new mechanized plants performing most of the nation's parcel and sack handling.¹¹ Most of the sack and parcel sorters over which the jurisdictional disputes were raised have been phased out. Coping with the extensive clerk and mail handler dislocations has absorbed both LIUNA's and APWU's efforts in the last year.

The twenty-one new centers have a total of 50 power driven sack sorters and 90 parcel sorters. All machines are computer controlled and utilize ZIP Code keying. Since each sack sorting machine can employ four keyers at one time, and each parcel sorting machine ten to twenty-five keyers, there are thousands of mechanized operator positions at stake.

Management assigned all sack sort keyer positions to mail handlers at the PS-5 level and all parcel sorting positions to clerks at the PS-5 level. These assignments satisfied several criteria. First, they are consistent with the traditional craft jurisdictions recognized in the Garrett Award. Second, they satisfied the specific guidelines established by postal management in the Sullivan Award. Finally, and most important, they represent a rough pragmatic compromise in total job assignments to both crafts and craft unions.

Nevertheless, the APWU still views the entire problem of craft assignment with misgivings. It is a union on the defensive. It must defend jobs and members from attack by LIUNA, a militant minority group craft union unrestrained by competing craft claims among its membership.

The clerks fear that technological changes will further debase clerks' intellectual skills and will replace them with mail handlers' physical labor and dexterity. Their fears are not unfounded. The new clauses of the National Agreement which established the Committee on Jurisdiction and the National Bulk Mail System have merely postponed the day of reckoning.

[The End]

Guide

¹¹ For a description of the design and activation of the National Bulk Mail System, see the series of articles by Bernie

Kaill in the July, August, and September, 1976, issues of *Material Handling Engineering*.