

The Mail Strike

Just the beginning

Karl Fischer

1970

The postal workers' strike exploded like a time-bomb across the nation. Beginning in New York City, and spreading quickly through every major city in the country.

The massive revolt defied court injunctions, Presidential orders, and the miserable sell-outs in the union bureaucracies. The workers were beyond the control of legal actions and of their union "leadership." They went out to demonstrate that they intended to win.

But the postal strike has significance far beyond the immediate issues. It is only the latest in a series of militant labor struggles that are engulfing capitalist Amerika this year. The political lesson to be drawn is crystal clear. The "class peace" of the previous era is dead.

Yes, Virginia, there is a working class. It is not a metaphysic; it is not an abstraction invented out of the red mists of Marxist theory. It is composed of real human beings; they walk, they talk, and they fight like hell when they get messed over.

What the postal strike signifies is a massive revolt springing from the rank-and-file of America's working people. It is a revolt which can completely change the political and social reality of America in the immediate future.

The gut issue that sparked the postal wildcat walkout is wages. The top salary a postal worker can earn—after 21 years of seniority—is about \$8,200 a year. The starting salary is slightly over \$6,000.

There is no cost-of-living clause whatsoever; the massive inflation of the past three years has been murder for these workers. Four years ago, supporting a family on such wages was difficult; today it just isn't possible.

A postal worker has virtually no protection against abusive working conditions. The grievance procedure is worthless; and all unions sign no-strike pledges that leave workers at the mercy of their boss (the Federal Government).

For the past fourteen months, postal workers have tried to win reforms through peaceful and legal channels. A bill was introduced into Congress to provide a pay raise and some minimal reforms in other areas. The national union leadership assured workers it would pass, but the bill just sat in a Congressional committee. Wednesday March 18, workers in New York decided that they had seen enough and walked off the job.

The result was a spontaneous explosion of militancy. Within two days, the strike had spread to include all of New York City, most of New Jersey and a large part of Connecticut. By the weekend, postal service in every major city was shut down—including Chicago, which is used as a national clearinghouse for interstate mail delivery.

The union leadership responded with an order for mailmen to go back to work. The rank and file response was to spread the strike to more cities. James Rademacher, president of the National Association of Letter Carriers, the largest of the unions involved, issued daily assurances that the strike would end the next day. Each morning, the workers proved him wrong.

In Detroit, a mass meeting of postal workers was called in Cobo Hall on March 22. Some 9,000 workers heard their leadership urge them to go back to work. Their response was to vote unanimously to stay out, waving clenched fists and chanting "No! No! No!"

In many areas, union bureaucrats have resorted to red-baiting to try to break the strike. In New York, the president of the union accused SDS of provoking the whole thing. In Detroit, members of SDS were harassed by union leaders when they attempted to join picket lines.

In Los Angeles, the union accused the International Socialists of organizing the strike, on the flimsy grounds that a member of I.S. in San Francisco was a leader of a rank-and-file caucus that was leading the struggle in that city. The idea that masses of workers were simply fed up and ready to fight for their due was apparently beyond their comprehension.

The response of President Nixon to the militancy and determination of the strikers was to threaten to use troops to break the strike, and on March 23rd, the threat became real. Nixon ordered army troops into New York City to begin scabbing on the strikers.

The impact of this move was unclear. Most people agree that the troops were ineffective in actually moving the mail. If Nixon's intent was to frighten the workers, indications are that the tactic backfired. The effect was to make workers that much more angry.

The whole postal wildcat was a tremendous surprise to the entire country. But it really shouldn't have been. The effect of low wages combined with rampant inflation has pushed postal workers against the wall.

When workers get pushed to the wall, they fight back, and they fight back with the one weapon they have. They stop production. If they have to break the law to do that, they break the law. If they have to defy the President, the cops, or the army, they will do it.

The postal workers had waited patiently for too long. They found strength in their united numbers and understood that it would take civil disobedience to force action on their demands.

Without the bureaucratic union leadership, the rank-and-file were able to spontaneously exercise their power. In the few days that they stayed off their jobs, most average citizens were able to adjust, but finance and industry were crippled.

The postal workers have returned; they let the government know their strength. Nixon has promised them that an agreement was forthcoming. They heard that before, so they gave him one week. Time is up 2:00 p.m. April 2. The unions will walk off again if an agreeable breakthrough is not reached.

The postal strike was the opening round in a coming series of militant labor struggles. In the past two years, developments have occurred in most of the basic industries in Amerika that today threaten to erupt into massive struggles like the postal wildcat strike.

An example that's close to home is the auto industry. In 1967, the UAW's cost-of-living clause was sold out by Walter Reuther; as a result, the inflation of recent years has driven real wages steadily down. More than that, working conditions have steadily worsened. They've always been bad in auto plants, but they've gotten steadily worse and have sparked numerous local wildcat strikes in Detroit, Flint, New Jersey and elsewhere.

Beyond that, the issue of racism on the shop floor has become a major battle. Black workers across the country are organizing themselves into independent rank-and-file groups like DRUM from the League of Revolutionary Black Workers here in Detroit. This September, all auto contracts are up for renegotiation.

All sides agree that there will be massive strikes and heavy confrontations because the issues have become highly volatile, the rank-and-file are now angry, organized, and militant, and companies are unwilling to yield when confronted with peaceful tactics. Ask your father about what happened in Detroit auto plants in the '30s. It may happen again next fall.

The wave of labor militancy reaches into every major industry. In West Virginia, coal miners organized a six-week strike that shut the entire state down last year to back up demands for legislation to give relief to "black lung" disease (silicosis) which kills thousands of miners every year. In the electrical industry, a 13-union coalition was organized to strike against General Electric, marking the first time in history that a national strike has been organized against GE.

In San Francisco, a strike of garbage workers led to a general strike of city employees, which quickly won a victory after only four days. Three national contracts come up this month in the highly volatile rubber industry, with both sides agreeing that a strike is inevitable.

As the economic contradictions tighten, the American ruling class will attempt to do what it always does in such times; throw the burden of the crisis onto the working class. A massive attack on the living standards and working

conditions of the working class is developing; and as it does, workers will fight back with every weapon they can muster.

They will discover in short order that the union bureaucracies are incapable of providing a solution and they will organize new mass organizations of struggle. They will learn that the government is intervening in the fight on the side of the companies and the struggle will become political as well as economic. White workers, schooled for years in a racist culture, will be forced to choose between an alliance with black workers, or failure and defeat. They will not choose to commit class suicide.

Out of this will come the beginnings of a revolutionary movement of the working class, capable of struggling for political power and providing the only real alternative out of the disaster and chaos that is Amerika today.

fifth Estate

Karl Fischer
The Mail Strike
Just the beginning
1970

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/102-april-2-15-1970/the-mail-strike>
Fifth Estate #102, April 2-15, 1970

[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)