

Building a powerful nationwide grass-roots movement to

# Save the People's Post Office

By Dave Welsh

Without question, the big-business class – and their agents in USPS headquarters, the executive branch and Congress – are on a path to dismantle the Postal Service, privatize the profitable parts of it, and neutralize or destroy the postal unions.

Their whole economic system is in crisis. It's not working. So the 1% are trying to pull their own chestnuts out of the fire by a full-bore attack on unions, the workers and the poor – an attack on our union contracts, our jobs, economic security, wages, benefits, conditions, and social services. Their assault on the Post Office is part of this strategy.

The Post Office was founded July 26, 1775 by the Continental Congress, to provide public mail service. Today private companies like Pitney Bowes are salivating over the prospect of grabbing a chunk of this highly successful, \$69-Billion-in-annual-revenue business. The plan? – to close post offices in poor and rural areas; shutter mail processing plants delaying the mail by 1 day to 1 week; eliminate door-to-door and Saturday mail delivery; wipe out 100,000+ union postal jobs in a time of high unemployment. They also want to sell off historic landmark post offices that they own free-and-clear like those in the Bronx, New York, and Berkeley CA, containing priceless New Deal artwork, and then pay top-dollar to rent retail space to replace it.

**How can we fight it?** By itself, the legislative strategy – trying to influence Congress – is not working. Congress is bought and sold by the 1% – they won't begin to listen to **us** until we're in the streets, mobilized in all our numbers.

The rank and file postal workers, and our communities, who support us – this is the source of our real strength. We need to reach out and tap into it, just as we did in the Great 1970 Postal Strike. That grassroots upsurge brought about a big change in the relationship of forces between postal workers and the bosses. What used to be work for poverty wages became a living-wage job, with a union contract to protect the workers' rights. Any postal worker can see this.

A statement by the Million Worker March movement helps to clarify the situation we face today: "All important social movements ...in this country were started from the bottom up (rank and file/grass roots) and not from the top down....A handful of the rich, and powerful corporations have usurped our government. A corporate and banking oligarchy changes hats and occupies public office to wage class war on working people. They have captured the State in their own interests." (Oct. 17, 2011)

When Reagan took office as President, one of his first acts was to bust the PATCO air traffic controllers union, ushering in three decades of attacks on the union movement and steady decline in the living standards of the working class.

Today, the 1% have a much bigger target – the Postal Service. They hate the fact that the 574,000 who work for the nation's second biggest employer are under union contract and making a living wage.

They hate the fact that in 1970 the postal workers took their destiny into their own hands and shut down the entire mail system for the better part of a week, demonstrating the power of the workers and disrupting business as usual. And the 1970 nationwide postal strike taught another lesson: that the wealth of the 1% only exists because the 99% creates it for them.

The nation's largest employer is Walmart. The employer class would dearly love to reduce those 574,000 postal workers to Walmart wages and non-union status. But just because they want it, doesn't mean they'll get it.

### **The racist side of the campaign to demolish the P.O. and bust the unions**

There's another side to the move to dismantle and destroy the public Postal Service, this country's largest unionized employer. And that is the disproportionate effect it would have on workers and communities of color.

If you've ever seen a group picture of postal workers from before the second world war, in many places it would be a practically all-white group, and mostly men. But after World War II things began to change, with the development of the civil rights and Black liberation movements. The P.O. began hiring Asian Americans, Latinos, Mexican Americans, African Americans, and a lot more women. So that by the time of the 1970 Strike, it was a much more integrated and diverse work force.

Today the Postal Service is the largest single source of Black employment [20% of the postal workforce]. For many workers of all nationalities, it is one of the few places where living-wage jobs are still available in our low-pay, "post-industrial" economy.

The campaign to privatize and de-unionize the USPS is a threat to the livelihood of every affected worker and neighborhood. But it stands to hit hardest in those communities of color that are already suffering unemployment at Great Depression levels. We need a movement that puts in the forefront those most impacted by the postal crisis – Black, brown and rural communities; elderly, disabled and low-income people.

## **Building Community/Labor Coalitions in every city and town**

We can and must build a powerful, nationwide movement to defeat privatization, maintain living-wage postal jobs, expand postal services, and save the Post Office as a public entity operating in the public interest.

This grass-roots effort has already begun. Community-based coalitions are springing up, with some creative tactics. Here's a sampling:

- **In New York City**, Community-Labor United for Postal Jobs & Services organized large neighborhood protests to stop the closing of postal facilities in Harlem, South Bronx, Staten Island, Chelsea, and Coop City – as well as keep 6-day delivery and preserve living-wage postal jobs. The youth group of Al Sharpton's National Action Network participated in a "Don't Close It" march and occupation of a Harlem station. The coalition also organized a march of 500 to the Main Post Office on the anniversary of the 1970 postal strike, and a campaign to save the historic Bronx GPO, with active participation by the Puerto Rican community. <http://clupjs.com>
- **In Portland, Oregon**, a chanting crowd of 100-plus including postal union heads massed outside University Station, on the USPS chopping block for closing. Inside the station, one retired carrier and nine from Occupy Portland unfurled 10-foot banners reading, "Occupy the Post Office" and "No Closures, No Cuts!" and were arrested when they refused to leave. Great media coverage. The community coalition includes Jobs with Justice and Rural Organizing Project, which has mounted a "Return to Sender" campaign to preserve full-service post offices [without reduced hours] all over rural Oregon. When the USPS replaced union postal truckers with scab contractors, the coalition blocked the scab trucks.
- **In San Francisco**, a large crowd with an Occupy the Post Office banner took over the lobby of the Civic Center post office– one of four in the city that the Postmaster General wants to close. The station is a lifeline for the many people without homes, or living in city-supported "single room occupancy" hotels for the very poor – who get their mail in P.O. boxes or at the "general delivery" window. Some 200 people took part in the rally, march or occupation of the P.O. It was organized by Save the People's Post Office, a coalition that includes NALC and APWU activists, Living Wage Coalition, SF Labor Council, Church Women United, Green Party, Gray Panthers, Occupy SF Action Council, Union of Unemployed Workers, and Senior Action Network. After the action at Civic Center P.O., the Postmaster decided not to close the four S.F. stations after all. [SaveThePostOffice@sonic.net](mailto:SaveThePostOffice@sonic.net)

- **In Berkeley, CA** a year-long campaign to stop the sale of our historic post office has energized the community. The entire City Council came out against the sale, as did both houses of the California state legislature. Many hundreds came out to demonstrate and pack the hearings. A regular presence of tables and banners at the post office has kept citizens informed. Many gathered at the steps and in the lobby to sing songs celebrating the Post Office, including "Please Mr. Postman" with new words. Legal action to stop the sale is under way, as well as a plan to rezone the Main Post Office as part of a historic district of public buildings, so that it cannot be sold to private interests. Direct action to stop the sale is planned.
- **Local coalitions have banded together to form Communities and Postal Workers United.** CPWU organized a four-day hunger strike in Washington DC. The 10 fasting postal workers' message to Congress: "Stop Starving the Postal Service!" The fast was heavily covered by national and local media – a breakthrough in explaining to the public about the pre-funding mandate and other efforts to sabotage and privatize the service. The week ended with a protest at USPS headquarters at L'Enfant Plaza. Retired mail handler John Dennie attempted to make a citizen's arrest of Postmaster General Donahoe for the PMG's criminal actions in seeking to destroy the service. [Dennie charged the PMG with violating 18 US Code 1701, Knowingly and Willfully Obstructing Passage of the Mail, and 18 USC 1703, Delay of the Mail.] When police grabbed Brother Dennie, demonstrators sat-in. Since then, CPWU chapters have sprung up in many cities and towns. [www.cpwunited.com](http://www.cpwunited.com)
- **At the U.S. Capitol** - Last December, when Sen. Joe Lieberman and Rep. Darrell Issa announced their intention of using the lame-duck session of Congress to eliminate 6-day mail delivery, CPWU members called a hunger strike for the duration of the session; camped out in a banner-strewn tent on the National Mall facing the Capitol; rented a horse-drawn carriage to bring a giant "Save Saturday delivery" postcard to the White House; hand-delivered to the postal Board of Governors a dossier documenting long delays of mail after the closing of the Frederick, Maryland processing plant; and staged an hour-long sit-in at Issa's office, which led to one arrest and an impromptu 20-minute debate with Rep. Issa himself.

The movement is under way and growing, initiated by rank and file letter carriers, clerks and mail handlers and aroused communities who don't want to lose their Post Office. We can no longer wait for "someone else" to get things going. That "someone else" may very well be you.

*[Dave Welsh, a retired letter carrier and delegate to the San Francisco Labor Council, is an organizer with Save the People's Post Office, a community/labor coalition.]* A good information source is [www.SaveThePostOffice.com](http://www.SaveThePostOffice.com)