

# Inside Postal Workers:

## The Labour Process, State Policy, and the Workers' Response

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### Introduction

SINCE THE PUBLICATION of Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* in 1974, a number of works have examined the changing labour process under capitalism. Braverman's examination of the "degradation of work" by "scientific management" has been criticized for examining "the development of managerial strategies of control *solely* from management's point of view."<sup>1</sup> Herman argues that "the evolution of the labour process and the forms of capitalist control over it . . . are shaped by resistance and conflict."<sup>2</sup> This position was certainly noted by Braverman. He wrote, for instance,

What he [the capitalist] buys is infinite in *potential*, but in its *realization* it is limited by the subjective state of the workers, by their previous history, by the general social conditions under which they work as well as the particular conditions of the enterprise, and by the technical setting of their labor.<sup>3</sup>

However, this position was generally underdeveloped in Braverman's work. This paper contends that it is fundamental in any analysis of the changing work process to conceptualize workers as a subjective force, as actors with powers

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Herman, "Conceptualizing Control: Domination and Hegemony in the Capitalist Labour Process," *Insurgent Sociologist*, 11, (1982), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Herman, "Conceptualizing Control," 13.

<sup>3</sup> Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism* (New York 1974), 57.

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they may or may not use — in the case with which we are particularly concerned, to sort or not to sort mail.

Workers' activity tends to take organized forms. The ambiguous and contradictory position of the union as a workers' organization and as a legal entity structured into the confines of labour law, as an instrument of struggle for workers, and as a means for the state to contain workers' struggles, is central to the analysis presented here. Clement notes in his study of hardrock miners that, sit-ins and wildcat walkouts are often directed at the unions' inability to cope with workers' problems. . . . [Unions] are at one and the same time the most systematic and organised expression of [workers'] resistance and, through the commitments they make to companies when they enter into collective agreements a containment of many forms of workers' resistance.<sup>4</sup>

Panitch and Swartz point to the harsh dichotomy between the unions' roles "as agents of social control over their members rather than their spokespersons and organizers."<sup>5</sup> We contend that with respect to any union, even one with the militant and left-wing leadership of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), the nature of the labour laws and the capitalist labour process forces people into structures and social relations which may be at odds with their interests. We shall examine how shopfloor militancy is often undercut by the union's strategy of grievance procedure and its adherence to the structures of legal negotiation and labour tribunal.

In spite of such curbs on unions, labour organizations, in and of themselves, often provide the context in which struggle continues and, indeed, grows:

The very shop floor militancy which so disturbs corporate executives and union officials alike in the 1970s could not assume the open and chronic form which makes it notorious without the presence of union and legal defences against arbitrary dismissal. To see the role of unions in this setting as *nothing more* than disciplinary agents for management, therefore, is a facile and dangerous form of myopia.<sup>6</sup>

CUPW's battles against arbitrary discipline and in support of the integrity of the bargaining unit, it must be emphasized, have been numerous and significant. This activity has created a climate in which shopfloor struggles could grow.

This paper will first examine the postal labour process during the years it was transformed from a manual to a mechanized job. Then state policy as it was used to create restrictive labour legislation that impinged on postal workers' scope of action is discussed. In the next section, the workers' response within and outside the union structures will be shown. Concentration here is on the inside postal mail sorters and the paper leaves aside the question of letter carriers, truck drivers and mail handlers. We do this to discuss in more detail

<sup>4</sup> Wallace Clement, *Hardrock Mining: Industrial Relations and Technological Changes at INCO* (Toronto 1981), 301.

<sup>5</sup> Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, "Towards Permanent Exceptionalism: Coercion and Consent in Canadian Industrial Relations," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (1984), 145.

<sup>6</sup> David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America* (New York, 1981), 156.

the transformation of the inside postal clerks' work. As a preparatory note we will examine the 1965 postal strike and how this event helped shape the course of postal history during the 1970s.

In 1965 relations between postal workers and their employer, the Canadian federal state, were transformed by a national wildcat strike. Trouble in the post office had been brewing for some time. Low wages combined with pressure on workers to increase efficiency heightened antagonisms between management and workers. The strike began in Montreal and quickly spread to all the other major centres, where roving pickets tightened up the strike. Picketing was controlled by rank-and-file strike committees in defiance of the local officers of the Canadian Postal Employees Association (CPEA), which followed the national office of the association in opposing the strike.

Numerous attempts to end the strike by injunctions and threats of mass dismissals failed as the picket lines were maintained. After eleven days of strike action, the CPEA endorsed the strike and then the Canadian Labour Congress announced support for postal workers. Faced with an even more solid strike, the federal government tried to save face by appearing to cave in. A wage increase plus promises that there would be no reprisals and that a royal commission would be formed to investigate the post office were used by the CPEA to achieve a return to work.

The 1965 strike was particularly significant. The national wildcat was an important step in the destruction of the "civil service mentality" which had prevailed in the post office. While postal workers began to transform CPEA into a modern industrial union — the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) — the federal state realized it had to deal with a rapidly deteriorating situation. The federal labour laws were re-written and when this did not deal adequately with an increasingly belligerent and tactically innovative rank-and-file movement, the state instituted a transformation of the labour process.

## II

### The Labour Process in the Post Office

IN THE DAYS BEFORE mechanization, mail was sorted manually by a group of workers who memorized some 10,000 bits of information concerning mail distribution points, and recalled it quickly and accurately to sort each piece of mail. This sortation was a manual process whose pace was not dictated by a machine. The workers learned the sortation system on their own time. A new worker was handed "the book," which detailed the mail sortation breakdown, and was told to learn the system. With the help of fellow workers and a lot of homework, the speed and accuracy of mail sortation was maintained. The working day was quite elastic. During each shift at receiving and dispatching times there were surges of mail. Everyone pitched in and worked fast to clear the mail out, and then took it easy after the rush. This was a process in which workers and supervisors participated jointly. Many of the male postal workers of this period were World War II veterans who had developed a sense of duty

about their work. The supervisors had often been higher ranking veterans, while the sorters had been lower ranked during their service in the war.

By the early 1960s it was clear the situation had changed. Steeply increasing mail volumes, business mail accounting for over 80 per cent of pieces sorted, put pressure on management to move the mail. The hiring of large numbers of part-time female workers began. This introduced a measure of sexual stratification into the labour force, since most full-time sorters were men and they were at the top of the postal worker wage hierarchy. The part-timers, coming mostly from non-waged housework, were paid a lower rate. Part-time workers were called in and sent home at management's discretion. The hiring of part-time workers prevented the expansion of full-time employment and blocked the movement of night workers onto day shifts.<sup>7</sup>

Management had other tactics at its disposal. Line supervisors had a large stock of arbitrary powers over workers, including disciplinary interviews, verbal harassment, the keeping of secret files, and suspension of sick leave. Supervisors could extend the probationary period of a worker from its minimum of six months to as long as two years. The union did not successfully challenge these arbitrary powers until the early 1970s.<sup>8</sup>

After the 1965 strike the supervisors greeted victorious strikers with an intensification of the old tactics of harassment, while workers began to forge new strategies of strength and power on the shopfloor. The workers' tactics will be described in more detail later in the paper. For now we will deal with management's changes in the labour process as mail volumes continued to build. At this time, the post office increasingly undertook to subsidize the activities of private capital by granting low, second-class rates for magazines and newspapers. The post office deficit rose from \$34 million in 1965 to \$80 million in 1969. The development of several Canadian cities, especially Toronto, into centres of international finance meant that mail was even more concentrated in large volumes. Toronto became a point through which about 50 per cent of the country's mail passed.

These developments created enormous pressure on post office management to devise new and more efficient methods of mail movement. In 1968, a number of studies conducted by private consulting firms on the question of mail processing were commissioned by the post office. The result was a report compiled from these studies entitled *Blueprint for Change*. This report was critical of labour intensive mail handling operations and called for the implementation of a programme of automation.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Joe Davidson and John Deverell, *Joe Davidson* (Toronto 1978), 85-8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-3; personal experience of Laidlaw, and discussions with other postal workers; CUPW/Treasury Board Collective Agreement 1975; Tremblay's arbitration decision, 1979.

<sup>9</sup> Submission by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers to the Conciliation Board, 10 April 1978, 3.

Management formulated during 1970 and 1971 a plan of attack upon the postal workers' growing power. This plan involved mechanizing the mail sortation system through the construction of new postal facilities. Mail terminals were to be replaced with letter processing plants. The first new plant was the Alta Vista facility in Ottawa, which was opened in April 1972.

In the postal machine sortation process there are two different machines that can print the coloured bar code on the letters. With the Optical Character Reader (OCR) the machine reads the postal code on each letter and then prints the bar code on the letter. On the Group Desk Suite (GDS) the worker reads the postal code, types it on a keyboard and then the bar code is printed on the letter. Each machine has two similar jobs of loading and unloading but the GDS also requires about eighteen workers sitting at the keyboards. Both machines do an initial sortation to about twenty categories corresponding to the computer programme in the Letter Sorting Machine (LSM). It is this machine that reads the coloured bar code and sorts the mail into almost 300 separate bins. With the LSM, one worker feeds it while two others "sweep" it, removing the letters from the bins and placing them in plastic trays. The trays are put on an overhead conveyor line which goes to the loading dock.

The post office had great hopes for the OCR. Jerry Fultz, director of coding and mechanization, said in 1972 that "OCRs will be able to recognize about eighty per cent of the printed fronts."<sup>10</sup> In reality OCRs rejected at least 90 per cent of the letters fed into them during the late 1970s. The post office has since offered lower postage rates for bulk business mailers who pre-sorted their letters. This type of mail is now fed into the OCRs, which have been updated at a high cost, and the result is a performance closer to Fultz's projections in 1972.

The LSM is the principal weakness in the machine sortation system: it is renowned among postal workers for inaccurately sorting and/or eating mail, plus it has numerous breakdowns. The workers who sweep the LSM are now told to check the machine's sortation by flipping through the letters. This practice was reluctantly ordered by management since it had hoped to end reliance on manual sortation knowledge in the machine area. The LSMs often have a downtime of four hours on an eight-hour shift due both to these breakdowns and to slow repairs due to lack of spare parts and poor design.

Most of this technology was purchased from the infamous multinational, International Telegraph and Telephone (ITT). John Mackay was president of ITT's Canadian branch from 1961 until 1969, when he became deputy postmaster-general.<sup>11</sup> After 1976 Mackay got a high level position in ITT's European operation. He is an example of the close relationship of state and private capital in Canada, described by Niosi, whereby the same people hold

<sup>10</sup> *Globe and Mail*, 7 September 1972, 3.

<sup>11</sup> CUPW, Vol. 11, No. 3, April-May 1981, 3.

positions in both sectors of corporate power.<sup>12</sup> Thus Mackay illustrates the forces that sought to benefit from the postal mechanization plans.

Faced with burgeoning mail volumes and growing worker's power on the shopfloor, the post office plunged impetuously into a programme of mechanization. The new letter processing plants became the scene of numerous machine breakdowns and inaccurately routed mail, resulting in great frustration to the Canadian public and to postal workers. In order to implement this programme the post office needed the power of the state exercised through the federal labour laws, which granted postal management legal sanctions not available to private capital.

### III

#### State Policy and the Post Office

BEFORE THE 1965 STRIKE the federal government was preparing legislation on collective bargaining for federal workers that would not allow strikes and would subject unresolved labour contracts to compulsory arbitration. With the 1965 strike it became obvious to policymakers in Ottawa that postal workers, at least, were quite able to take the right to strike on their own. Faced with this de facto acquisition of power, the policy was revised to create the Public Service Staff Relations Act (PSSRA) which was passed by parliament in 1967. The right to strike was granted to some 200,000 federal workers. In part the PSSRA can be seen as a first node in a general state policy of bestowing benefits won by postal workers upon other federal workers in an effort to prevent the spread of "post office fever."

The most succinct description of the PSSRA is that it is a "well laid legal snare."<sup>13</sup> Federal workers' unions were gathered into bureaucratic structures that alienated them from their rank and file, thus constraining the expression of workers' power in their union. In a sense, the right to strike was lost because of the legal sanctions and bureaucratic powers created by the PSSRA. The process involved in gaining the legal right to strike under the PSSRA was deliberately lengthy, resulting in many frustrating situations on the shopfloor. Negotiations could begin at the earliest only one month before the expiration of the existing contract. After it became obvious that the parties could not reach a settlement on their own, as was the case with the post office in 1970s and 1980s, a conciliation board was created. The board had a nominee appointed from each side plus a supposedly neutral chair appointed by the Public Service Staff Relations Board, also created under the PSSRA. The conciliation board heard submissions from both sides, then submitted a report to the minister of labour.

<sup>12</sup> Jorge Niosi, *Canadian Capitalism: A Study of Power in the Canadian Business Establishment* (Toronto 1981), 115-6.

<sup>13</sup> Davidson and Deverell, *Davidson*, 97.

This report was to be used as a basis of settlement. Seven days after the report was submitted the union had the legal right to strike. Through this process, the period between the expiration of the contract to gaining the legal right to strike varied greatly. It was about five months in 1980, and over sixteen months in 1977-8.

During the negotiations for the 1968 and 1970 contracts, management refused to discuss numerous issues which were becoming ever more crucial to postal workers. Under the PSSRA, the determination of working conditions, the introduction of new technology, job security, the employment of casual workers, and various other concerns were excluded from negotiable items. Management had unilateral authority over these areas. As CUPW said in 1978, "The effects of automation were to become very serious not only on job security, job classification and seniority, but also on virtually every element of the work environment and conditions of employment. . . . [T]he problems associated with technological change have gradually become the core of the Union's negotiating program and increasingly the necessity to negotiate these issues has come into conflict with the very restrictive legislation governing the parties."<sup>14</sup>

In the period from 1968 to early 1974, the national leadership of CUPW was involved in a series of "consultative committees" with management, in an attempt to resolve the non-negotiable issues. Despite tinkering with the contract language regarding these "consultations" the net result was the same. Management continued to formulate automation plans in secret while using the consultation committees to debilitate the union by having it participate in a powerless bureaucratic structure. The prime example of this came in April 1972 when the Alta Vista plant was opened. It was at this time that "competitions were opened for operators of the new machines that the Employer informed the union that the job title would be coder and that the positions would be classified at the lowest possible level, PO Level 1."<sup>15</sup> The wage rate was 20 per cent lower than for the manual sorters (PO Level 4). Instead of a strike or other protest action, the union leadership filed a complaint under the PSSRA. The arbitration decision, rendered in October, was that while the post office had violated the obligation to "meaningfully consult" with the union, it was nonetheless completely within its rights to set up a new job classification at a lower wage rate. The adjudicator's report demonstrates the legal sanction given to management by the PSSRA for any kind of activity, so long as it followed certain legal forms.

Thus, in sum, a series of bureaucratic structures were created under the PSSRA and the collective agreement. The rank and file was neglected as the day-to-day work of elected union officials came to revolve around labour lawyers, arbitrators, conciliation boards, consultative committees, and post office management. The result was the creation of various temporary vague

<sup>14</sup> *Submission by CUPW, 1978, 1-2.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

articles and appendices to the contract which gave the illusion of job security and protection from the harmful effects of automation.<sup>16</sup>

#### IV

#### The Workers' Response: Shopfloor Militancy and the Union

IN PART SHOPFLOOR resistance was based on the manual postal workers' control over the pace of work. Locked up in the workers' heads, the vital knowledge upon which the production process depended was accessible only through certain kinds of treatment. In the immediate post-war period, line supervisors had depended upon the workers' sense of duty to get the mail moving. For many workers, this sort of paternalistic conception was destroyed by the strike of 1965 and by the harassment of supervisors. To management, "duty" probably began to appear as a poor anchor for managing the mail. However, the problem of productivity remained.

After the failure of harassment as an effective prod (which didn't mean its abandonment), management hired more and more part-time female workers. Management hoped to overcome the productivity problem by exploiting a new group of workers unused to shopfloor struggles, and, by using the divisiveness of the sexist attitudes of male postal workers, to break shopfloor solidarity. The union was extremely ambiguous in its response to part-time workers. They were admitted into the union in 1968, and separate agreements were negotiated for them in 1969, 1970, and 1973. Only after 1975 did CUPW bargain seriously on behalf of part-time workers, securing the abolition of individual work measurement in their case.

Management also attempted to exploit age differences in the postal labour force, but here its divisive tactics backfired. Management hired large numbers of younger workers after 1965, hoping they would prove more docile. But these young workers, with no experience of the social discipline of wartime, were not attached to supervisors by any sense of "duty." As Duquette observed, a sharp antagonism developed between the

two distinct age groups, young workers and older army supervisors. 70 percent of these supervisors have high school or less, 55 percent are over the age of 55 and another 32 percent over 40.<sup>17</sup>

Young workers had no intrinsic attachment to the job of mail sortation. They recognized the work for what it was: monotonous, routinized, and tedious in its detail. Shopfloor struggles erupted increasingly over issues of individual autonomy and over attempts by workers to make social contact in the workplace easier and more enjoyable. Management's conception of the worker and a task, a conception completely distorted by the weight of budget deficits, was one of a robot who sat in silence sorting mail and whose intimate functioning could be

<sup>16</sup> Davidson and Deverell, *Davidson*, 125.

<sup>17</sup> M. Duquette, "Postal Strike: Truce — Peace?" *Postal Journal of Canada*, 40 (2), 5.



closely monitored. This conception produced shopfloor resistance to imposed productivity levels. Battles erupted over the right to talk while working, to work while sitting down, and over the right to defecate and urinate without being observed.

Union stewards became involved in these battles as they discussed with management the reaction of the shopfloor to the conditions of work. The ambiguity inherent in the role of the union as at once mediator between rank and file and management, and as the workers' organization increasingly stood out. For example, the old system of self-help and home work used to teach the geographic sortation system broke down in the face of the refusal of younger workers to spend their "free" time on postal work. Management in Toronto set up a post office "school" for this purpose. Stewards on the Toronto city sortation participated in an effort to find a method of schooling which would not increase animosity. Stewards were undoubtedly trying to save rank-and-file members from "hassles," but social peace at the expense of control over the transmission of vital labour skills was a poor bargain.<sup>18</sup>

This kind of ambiguity increased in the later 1960s and early 1970s as the collective agreement became more complex and as line supervisors faced increasing antagonism on the shopfloor. Stewards began to intervene more frequently in shopfloor struggles on a shift basis. In part this led to a strengthening of concessions won on the shopfloor, and their formalization. But it also tended to increase the importance of the collective agreement relative to direct action on the shopfloor.

For example, as the gap between worker and supervisor grew, workers increasingly refused to allow supervisors to touch the mail. Their tactic was simple and direct: when a supervisor began to sort mail or to throw mailbags onto a truck all work on the shopfloor would stop. "People would stop and watch him; soon no one was working except the supervisor."<sup>19</sup> Eventually the collective agreement included a provision which prohibited supervisors from sorting mail (except for "training" purposes). After the inclusion of this clause in the agreement, stewards reacted to working supervisors by filing grievances. The collective agreement created a structure which served in part to defuse shopfloor militancy — to defuse the very strength which had led to its provision in the contract — and shop stewards often unwittingly assisted.

The national leadership of CUPW was not developing in concert with the growing shopfloor struggles. Ongoing educational programmes were lacking, especially with regard to the restrictions of the PSSRA and the automation plans. Being caught up in the consultation mechanism, the national leadership was leaving the membership adrift as events advanced. At the triennial CUPW convention in 1971 the Quebec delegation roasted them for this lack of policy and initiative. Some more progressive ideas were adopted but little real change

<sup>18</sup> Discussion between Laidlaw and union stewards.

<sup>19</sup> Discussion between Laidlaw and a union officer.

resulted. Whatever the formal union policy was, the national officers were unable or unwilling to press the issues or take action; management thus retained its prerogatives.

However, all this trouble at the top did prevent the rank and file from trying to take measures into their own hands. In the fall of 1972 Toronto management substantially increased the numbers of letter cases for part-time workers in the postal terminal. Shop stewards' and rank-and-file workers' objections were met with the claim that management had "consulted" (read "informed") the union about these matters. The new sortation cases were used by part-time workers, whom CUPW had in a separate bargaining unit, and who were paid less than full-time clerks and subjected to individual work measurement and production quotas. While the PSSRA had prevented the national officers from bargaining about these matters, initiations on the shopfloor opposed the new cases. Militant stewards and workers set up pickets to protest the new sortation areas. However, the work force itself was divided, between part-time, mostly female workers and full-time, mostly male, clerks. There were also a large number of recently hired probationary workers. The local executive urged workers to cross the picket and a large minority did so. The striking workers returned to work after management acquired a court injunction against their picket. A campaign of slow-downs and refusal to work overtime began on the shopfloor.<sup>20</sup>

A wildcat strike broke out in Toronto late in January 1973 over the contract settlement that did not change the involvement of national union officers in the debilitating consultative committees. The strike lasted three days. The local union executive called on the city police to lead a minority of workers across the picket lines.<sup>21</sup> This wildcat was accompanied by the growing militancy of the shopfloor. Slow-downs, high labour turnover, "sick-offs," and refusals of overtime became common. For instance, in Toronto a sit-down took place when paycheques were not delivered on time. Workers in one section of the terminal sat at the letter cases and refused to sort mail until the cheques were delivered later that night.<sup>22</sup> These initiatives remained isolated to particular shifts in Toronto, despite attempts by some stewards and rank-and-file members to generalize them.

Management moved ahead rapidly with its programme of mechanization. New letter processing plants were opened in the West at Regina, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Calgary, and Edmonton, with all the coders earning the lower rate. Management planned to get the new system firmly in place in most smaller centres before tackling Toronto and Montreal. Toronto was targeted for mechanization in 1975 or 1976, and Montreal for 1978 or 1979. (The actual moves were made in 1977 and 1980.)

<sup>20</sup> Discussions between Laidlaw and postal workers.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Johnson, *The Trade Unions and the State* (Montreal 1978), 138.

<sup>22</sup> Discussions between Laidlaw and postal workers.

The national union undertook a boycott of the postal code during this period. This was primarily an educational gesture, since 90 per cent of mail volume was from business, which supported productivity increases in the post office and was prepared to use the code.

This situation, with the post office management on the offensive and the national union lost in a *miasma*, was abruptly broken by postal workers in Montreal. These workers undertook a six-day occupation of the Montreal post office in April 1974. The press presented this occupation as the result of the suspension of some workers wearing "Boycott the Postal Code" T-shirts. But the strike began as a shopfloor initiative against an obnoxious supervisor. When workers refused to work until the supervisor was removed,

A number of workers were suspended on the spot, and when a steward spoke to them in a nearby lunchroom shortly afterwards, he was fired on the spot. The workers involved then decided to go from floor to floor in the main terminal to stop work and start an occupation, with the workers' demand being the immediate unconditional lifting of all disciplinary actions. As the occupation spread, management continued to suspend workers, until more than 300 had been suspended.<sup>23</sup>

The workers seized the building. Management and supervisors were thrown out, all the doors were secured, and guards were posted. The inside phones were seized for communicating between floors and the telex machines allowed communication between Montreal and Ottawa union officials. About 200 workers were in the building at all times. Two days after the occupation began, a court injunction ordered the workers to leave the building, but they refused. The occupation was forcibly ended by Montreal riot police early in the morning of 16 April. A mass meeting of workers in Montreal reaffirmed their decision to fight for their demands until they were won and the struggle began to move across the country to other postal locals.

By refusing to negotiate the suspensions, the post office revealed that it was "bent on tearing the guts out of the Montreal local."<sup>24</sup> The postmaster-general declared publicly that the Montreal workers had no significant support anywhere else in the postal system. As well, when the Montreal local refused to allow the national union president, the leading advocate of the staffing committee, to negotiate for them in Ottawa, he resigned. The national presidency was assumed by Joe Davidson, and Jean-Claude Parrot (national chief steward) became the Montreal local's spokesperson in Ottawa. With this change in leadership, the union called a national sit-down strike of postal workers which began on 16 April 1974.

But the united rank-and-file initiatives which had characterized the situation in Montreal were lacking in other centres. A common attitude in Toronto was "the union called it, the union can call it off." Part of this attitude came from

<sup>23</sup> "The April Postal Strike: Workers, Union and the State," *Newsletter*, 4 (Fall 1974), 27-9.

<sup>24</sup> Davidson and Deverell, *Davidson*, 147.

the union's lack of support for rank-and-file initiatives and wildcats in 1972 and 1973, plus the fact that a strike vote was not taken before calling the sit-down strike. The April 1974 strike in many locals did not proceed from rank-and-file initiative, and participation in the sit-downs waned until, in Toronto, picket lines were set up to replace the sit-down. As well, in the case of Toronto, a debilitating and anti-Quebécois local executive was in place which opposed the militancy of shop stewards and which drew upon some of the membership's fears of "communist" groups operating on the shopfloor. Left-wing stewards were unable to break through shopfloor divisions, a situation exacerbated by the division of the work force among shifts, classifications, and gender, as well as by some anti-Quebécois sentiment.<sup>25</sup>

At this time, the national union put forward the demand that all postal clerks, including coders on machines and manual sorters, be reclassified at the post office level (POL) 5, guaranteeing them the same wage rate. This demand was issued by the Montreal local, which sought to strengthen the strike nationally, but little education had been done on this issue either during or after the strike. In Toronto workers respected the picket lines but they did not strike over the coder issue.

With the shutdown of postal operations, negotiations began in Ottawa. A special conciliator, Eric Taylor, was appointed, and by 26 April a deal had been agreed upon. The post office was forced to lift all disciplinary actions against workers and all pending court cases for injunctions or sanctions were dropped. The coder issue was referred to a union-management committee with Taylor as chair. A few days after the strike, the government announced a 25-cent an hour wage increase for all federal workers in an effort to quell a "touchy situation" which pervaded the federal civil service where several illegal work stoppages happened in 1974. In Montreal, a mass meeting voted to accept the settlement and a rousing victory march was held.

CUPW's 1974 convention followed the strike. The demands of the Quebec delegation, which for years had been attempting to make the national union executive deal with automation and to democratize the union's structure, became union policy. These demands had gained widespread support, especially with the elimination of some dead wood at the national level. Women working as part-timers in the post office participated as equals in this convention for the first time. From this convention, the union decided to increase substantially its educational efforts. Communications bulletins increased, union bulletin boards in the workplace were upgraded, and the quality of the union newspaper was improved. As one participant put it,

We should not forget that CUPW puts out a lot of communication to its members. We are in favour of communicating, but were also forced into it, being one bargaining unit

<sup>25</sup> Discussions of Laidlaw and Toronto postal workers.

spread all across the country. When we began to negotiate with the employer on the basis of the strength of the membership we learned how important communication is.<sup>26</sup>

In Ottawa, the post office and the union, backed by a strong rank-and-file initiative, began negotiations with Taylor, the conciliator. Joe Davidson claimed that "the charade of consultation was for a time replaced with genuine negotiation."<sup>27</sup> In January 1975 an agreement on the coder issue was signed. All the manual and machine sortation "duties" were combined into a new coder-sweeper-sorter classification, (POL 4) at the old manual sortation clerk wage rate. "In effect, the Union and its members had been forced to engage in 2-1/2 years of struggle simply to avoid pay cuts and maintain the classification status quo."<sup>28</sup> Management also agreed to respect seniority rights in the movement to new facilities. Previously, management had stated it would assign workers according to its own criteria. It conceded that existing patterns would be maintained with respect to shift staffing. This promised the integration of established work groups of "posties" on each shift. The destruction of established work groups had been a divisive tactic contemplated by management. Most hand sorters, however, moved into the new plant on their old shifts and at their old jobs in a substantially changed work environment.

It was not until these negotiations of 1975 that union officers learned for the first time of the extensiveness of management's plans for postal reorganization.

It became clear to the Union that the automation program was far more substantial than they had been led to believe and was constantly expanding. Indeed, where Post Office officials used to speak of letter sorting machines in 15 centres and the cost of automation being approximately \$96 million [we found] a total expenditure of \$847 million on 39 major facilities in 26 cities.<sup>29</sup>

By adding figures contained in the budget of the Department of Public Works, which was responsible for the construction and maintenance of buildings, the cost was over one billion dollars.

During the negotiations in 1975, preparations for the opening of the new postal plants in Toronto were nearing completion. The union argued strongly for a "negotiated" entry into the new plants under the slogan "All postal workers must share in the benefits of automation." In Montreal, lightning strikes and harassment focused on the employment of numbers of unprotected casual workers in an effort to "implement the union policy of combatting casual employment." Management responded by suspending and firing about 300 people, gutting the local shop steward corps. The Montreal local appealed to the national office for a strike, but with the postmaster-general "fanning all the latent resentment and English French bigotry within our ranks" the national office ordered a work-to-rule instead. Since "the response from most locals

<sup>26</sup> J.C. Parrot, interview, *Studies in Political Economy*, 11 (1983), 53.

<sup>27</sup> Davidson and Deverell, *Davidson*, 151.

<sup>28</sup> CUPW submission, 1978, 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

was pathetic,"<sup>30</sup> the national office was correct in not calling a strike, especially with the 1975 negotiations leading to a strike themselves.

When a strike did come in 1975, after the failure of negotiations, it lasted from 21 October to 2 December. The post office settlement contained substantial concessions. Included were cost-of-living clause (COLA), the ending of work measurement for part-timers, the reduction of the wage differentials endured by mail handlers, and the placing of limitations on the employment of casual workers by granting blanket overtime. One crucial concession was the curtailment of the arbitrary powers of supervisors by requiring written notice for disciplinary interviews and by allowing shop stewards to be present in such interviews. Much of the shopfloor strife and many of the grievances filed after 1975 were related to this section of the contract, with rank-and-file members attempting to concretize the gains contained in the contracts.

This contract seemed like a test case for the newly created Anti-Inflation Board, which attempted to reject it. However, the militancy of postal workers forced the federal cabinet to overrule the AIB and the new agreement was signed. Even with these gains and concessions in the contract 48 per cent of the membership voted to continue the strike. Montreal workers were particularly opposed to the settlement, in part because of the firings and suspensions from the April 1975 struggles in the local. These firings and suspensions were not resolved until 30 months later, in 1977, when adjudicators reduced most of the suspensions and ordered the post office to pay over \$500,000 in lost wages to those subjected to arbitrary disciplinary action. Nonetheless, fifteen workers were fired, and the federal court later refused their appeal for reinstatement.

Article 29 in the 1975 agreement dealt with technological change, and specified a detailed method for dealing with the introduction of changes. As one postal worker put it, Article 29 read "like a fairy-tale." Under it, "all adverse affects on employees" were to be "eliminated." Management was to notify the union 90 days "before the introduction of a technological change with a detailed description" of it. The union and management were then "to hold constructive and meaningful consultations to reach an agreement on solutions to problems arising from these changes." Forty-five days later, failing a union-management agreement, problems were to be referred to a "special adjudication committee" composed of a union and a management representative, and a chair. This committee was to deliver a binding report in another 45 days. If all went well, the report would be delivered the day changes were to go into effect.

However, as CUPW pointed out in its submission to the 1978 conciliation board, the operation of these provisions was entirely dependent upon the post office honouring its obligation for "good faith bargaining," and not upon the "employees' right to strike over technological changes"<sup>31</sup> as provided in the

<sup>30</sup> Davidson and Deverell, *Davidson*, 161-3.

<sup>31</sup> CUPW submission, 1978, 9.

Canada Labour Code. This good faith never existed and there is no evidence to suggest that the post office had any intention to follow the collective agreement in this regard.

The postmaster-general was greeted at opening ceremonies for a new postal facility in Saint John, New Brunswick with a wildcat strike. With new facilities about to open in London and Windsor, Ontario and in St. John's, Newfoundland, the post office proceeded as if Article 29 did not exist. Workers were ordered to report to the new facilities or face dismissal. The national union employed a battery of lawyers in an attempt to get the post office to adhere to the collective agreement, while workers were being forced into the new plants.

In May 1976, the adjudicator found that the post office had in fact violated numerous parts of Article 29, but he had no power to penalize management in any way or to suggest any remedy, since neither Article 29 nor the PSSRA gave him any such authority. The legal arguments, largely attempts by post office lawyers to stall procedures until the move into the new plants was complete, carried on into the summer of 1976. On 24 September, the post office's lawyers argued before a special adjudication committee that if a decision on Article 29 contravened the PSSRA or any other federal statute, the law would prevail. The post office was committed to violating the collective agreement, and it became increasingly clear that management hoped to circumvent its obligations while tying the union up in fruitless legal challenges: "For the Union, this was to be the last straw. The Union had fought the procedural battles in good faith, believing that in the end its rights would be upheld, even if belatedly."<sup>32</sup>

The national union demanded immediate postponement of all further technological changes until a solution could be negotiated, and strikes were threatened. With no response from the post office, rotating strikes were called in Vancouver for 4 October, Ottawa for the 5th, St. John's and London the 6th, and for Edmonton on 7 October. The post office applied for an injunction against these strikes on 5 October and on 12 October the union applied in turn "for an injunction compelling the Employer to postpone all further technological changes" until a mutually agreed upon solution could be reached.<sup>33</sup> A week later, both injunctions were dropped and lawyers for both parties agreed to seek mediation. This was largely a further stalling tactic on management's part. The mediation proceeding continued on into 1977 while the post office continued to open new facilities.

CUPW's national leadership was in a strategic crisis. Caught in the legal snare of the PSSRA and the collective bargaining process, the national union did not have the shopfloor structures in place which could have allowed it to tap into and organize the rapidly increasing anger and frustration among the membership.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

At this time the new facilities in Toronto — the South Central Letter Processing Plant and the Gateway complex — were beginning to “come on stream.” These two plants were a key part of the whole billion-dollar automation plan. The South Central plant alone cost \$140 million. Through it, 5 million pieces of mail passed daily, which in the late 1970s was 48 per cent of all Canadian mail. The preparations for the opening of these plants had been underway for some time.

Management in Toronto in April-May 1975 began to hire only employees called “terms.” This was shortly after the suspensions and firings in Montreal which had surrounded shopfloor initiatives against casual workers. (Despite the harsh penalties given out, Montreal has always had a much lower percentage of casual workers than Toronto.) This was also after the Taylor report which created the unified job classification “coder-sweeper-sorter.” Realizing that the Taylor report prevented the transformation of the existing sortation staff into coders on the new letter-processing machines, management sought these new coders in “term” employees. “Terms” were made to sign a form which stated that their employment was for a seven-month period or term, at the end of which their continued employment would depend upon their “record.” This was a transparent, but no less effective, means on the part of management to prey upon the insecurity of workers as a way to compel them to accept new and unpalatable kinds of work. No one in the Toronto local union, from stewards to full-time officials, was clear as to the status of these employees. They were not eligible to vote in union elections nor to attend union meetings, yet union dues were deducted from their paycheques. At the same time, as one steward put it, the old postal terminal “came to be overrun by terms.” Stewards could advise terms, but could not file grievances for them. This created a difficult situation on the shopfloor. As more and more of the evening and night shifts came to be composed of term employees, the ability of workers to exert pressure on supervisors lessened. Job insecurity created a group which could be easily intimidated by management.

Most term employees refused to cross picket lines during the 1975 strike in Toronto, but to protect them from being fired, the local prevented them from picketing. The local leadership, in the hands of chauvinistic, debilitated, and anti-Quebec officials, refused to put pressure on local management for the resolution of the issue of “terms.”

Supervisors, probably on their own initiative, took advantage of the insecurity many workers felt about the move to the new postal plants, an insecurity heightened in the case of union members by the increasing presence of non-union workers. Supervisors played upon workers’ lack of knowledge about the new postal plants to get petty revenge. Workers were harassed with stories and rumours of the new plants. “You won’t be able to get away with this at South Central,” supervisors would gloat. Stories circulated about impending layoffs, about supervision by closed-circuit television, and so on.



Management opened all coder jobs to union staff in the old plants, but very few clerks entered the coder training course. The term employees provided a potential labour supply, insecure and unable to express job preferences. Terms were sent to the South Central postal plant for a two week "coder training course." The pressure here was intense, with management refusing to guarantee jobs to term employees who failed coder training, although manual sortation of the mail continued. Management sought a speed of 1,000 letters an hour with 99 per cent accuracy after two or three weeks' training. This seems an onerous task to complete, but the simple nature of the work makes it easier than the numbers suggest.

Workers who passed this training course were kept on at the South Central plant, while those who failed (a high proportion) were sent back to their original shifts in the old postal terminal. The first workers in the new plant were thus term employees, mixed with a few union members. Later, management also used coder training as a tool for voiding the union's seniority list. In April or May 1977, when there were about 2,500-3,000 workers in the new South Central facility, some twenty positions were made available on the day shift. Management allowed only those with successful coder training to go on day shift, hoping both to coerce full-time manual sorters into coding, and to open the "machine area" in the daytime, where at this time only manual sorters worked on the day shift. Part-time workers who wanted to become full-time employees were also told that they had to pass coder training. In several ways then — through harassment, playing on workers' insecurity, threatening new workers, and disregarding established practices — management used the new coder-sweeper-sorter classification to facilitate the transition from skilled to unskilled postal work and to undermine the resistance of workers to this transition.

While the "old" labour process coexists with the machine sortation of mail (more workers are employed in manual than machine sortation), it has been penetrated to a certain extent by the simplified sortation system. When the sortation machinery breaks down, partially sorted mail is sent to the manual sortation area. This creates additional boredom and degradation of skill/initiative of the worker since most of this mail goes into only three or four slots in the case. Dealing with this kind of mail, as one worker put it, "makes you feel like you've become the LSM, the machine."

In the old postal terminal in Toronto, workers moved by their own initiative to different work stations as mail accumulated and was sorted. Workers felt responsible for getting mail moved out of their areas by the end of the shift, and the limited variety in different types of mail was appreciated. At South Central, this fairly elementary and limited freedom of movement was eliminated for workers in manual sortation. Supervisors decide when people move and where they go. This loss for the workers has lessened collective responsibility for work output and has added another measurement to the unsatisfying nature of postal work.

The high noise level is another constant irritant in the mechanized postal plants. The overhead conveyors carry plastic trays which bang together constantly and they emit a loud piercing whine when they break down, which can occur many times each shift. It is necessary to raise your voice or shout to carry on a conversation in many areas of the plants. Despite false ceilings and broadloom in some of the mechanized sortation areas, the constant hum and clatter of the machinery eliminates the casual talking common to the "old terminal."

To relieve the tedium to some extent, shop stewards persuaded management to allow a job rotation for all jobs in the machine sortation system at South Central. They successfully used productionist arguments: workers would get less tired and would work faster if they could move from job to job. Under this rotation, people move among the GDSs, the LSMs, and the OCRs on a printed rotation schedule. Workers also move from the machine area to the "hand" sortation area in the same manner. It took a wildcat strike in December 1977 to solidify this rotation.

An agreement between the national union and the post office "brass" in Ottawa had regulated the hiring of casual workers ("casuals"). These were temporary non-union workers whom the post office hired for short periods of time, often at lower wage rates. The agreement had been that casuals would be used *only for manual sortation and not in any machine sortation process*. At South Central, casuals had been used in the summer of 1977 in the machine sortation areas, but a grievance on this question was decided against management, and the issue apparently died. This was particularly important to coders, who had been told that anyone who did not pass coder training could not work on machine sortation, and who had seen people fired for failing to pass coder tests. The use of casual employees "off the street" was particularly offensive when they worked as coders.

However, management in Toronto hired casuals for the Christmas rush in 1977 and put them on machine sortation. Not only this, but casuals were set to feeding and sweeping the GDSs and LSMs while regular workers were forced in consequence to code mail for eight hours straight on each shift. This mind-numbing coding for eight hours, and the insult of hiring workers "off the street" caused a wildcat strike.

On 5 December 1977, about halfway through the afternoon shift, the full-time coding staff walked off the shopfloor and staged a sit-down in the cafeteria. The machine sortation steward and the chief steward were in the process of negotiating with management over the issue of casuals. The sit-down shut the machine area down for the rest of the shift. Before leaving the plant, workers voted that no work be done the next day either until casuals were taken out of the machine sortation area.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Johnson, *Trade Unions*, 152; discussions between Laidlaw and other workers involved in the strike.

The next day, the chief steward announced to people milling around in the lobby of the plant that no casuals would work in the machine area pending further negotiations. However, when the evening shift returned to work, supervisors again put casuals on machine sortation. The staff began to walk off the job and a steward was suspended when she got into an argument with a supervisor. The sit-down resumed in the cafeteria. Some people returned to the floor and got friends to walk out from other areas of the plant. However, the union executive stopped an initiative for a parade by coders through the plant to bring out the entire staff.

*Union executive officers negotiated with management throughout the night.* Management once again agreed to remove casuals from machine sortation, but they refused to lift reprisals against people involved in the walkout. The sit-down strikers in the cafeteria refused to accept this deal in order to protect the suspended steward.

Support for this strike by the afternoon shift didn't exist among the other shifts. The midnight shift refused to join the sit-downers and union stewards did not want to risk suspension by holding a strike vote on the shopfloor. Day staff, whose hours of work did not overlap with the afternoon shift, were unaffected.

On 7 December, management sent registered letters to nine workers informing them that they had received "indefinite suspensions" — a euphemism for being fired. Several of these people were shop stewards and several, including some of the stewards, were members of the Canadian Party of Labour. Only one of these nine — a steward — had been active in initiating the sit-down. Indeed, the CPL members did not even work in the coding area. Workers were generally aware that the post office was using the occasion to rid itself of activists.

The day after the suspensions was payday. The union got a promise from management to issue paycheques, but when they were issued, deductions were made for two days of strike action. Pay problems are common at the post office. Management often takes months to return erroneously deducted money to workers. Pressure on this day produced reduced paycheques *very* quickly. When workers showed up at the plant, some local union executive officers were at the doors telling people to report for work, while a large number of people were standing about in the lobby and immediately outside the building. With the deducted cheques and with the spread of the news that nine people had been fired, several hundred people walked onto the sidewalk in front of the plant and set up picket lines. The picketers were from all areas of the plant. Most of the workers went to the local union hall and forced the local executive to endorse an immediate strike at South Central. A mass meeting was planned for the weekend to vote on a local-wide strike.

The shift which followed the establishment of the picket line, the midnight shift, arrived at 9:45 PM with no warning of the picket, the fired workers, or the short paycheques. Many people crossed the line to get their cheques and then

went home or joined the picket. Some stayed inside despite the urgings of shop stewards in the front lobby. But the following day the plant was completely closed. The day staff largely respected the picket and mail drivers, who proved to be key, completely refused to cross the line or move any mail. A powerful winter storm helped keep the plant shut.

Management served notice of an injunction hearing within two days and cut off all negotiations with the union. The mass meeting called by the union drew only 700 out of a local membership of 5,000. Most of the 700 were from South Central, although the local contained the Gateway postal plants in Mississauga, the Airport Mail Facility in Malton, and many local stations. After much discussion a secret ballot on the strike issue resulted in a call for a strike of the entire local (384 aye — 334 nay).

The union presence at the Gateway plant was weak. Here many shifts were composed almost entirely of newly hired term employees, often without shop stewards. The reaction to pickets here was mixed. At the bulk mail facility (BMF) where the work force was largely composed of mail handlers from the old postal terminals, the pickets were respected. At the letter processing plant, however, many workers crossed the picket. Mail truck drivers were completely solid in their support for the strike.

This was a weak strike and the union executive wanted to settle as quickly as possible. Negotiations in the first days of the strike resulted in a shabby compromise. Local management agreed (for the third time) to remove casuals from machine sortation and the lifting of the nine suspensions pending the decision of regional postal officials. Since this strike, no casual workers have been used on machine sortation and job rotation practices have been retained in the South Central plant. But regional management fired most of the workers "suspended" in December. Through arbitration, all but two were reinstated: the two were a shop steward from the afternoon coding shift and a CPL shop steward. These firings dampened initiatives at South Central. Even those who were eventually reinstated suffered through several months without pay.

Wildcats and walkouts were common in the automated postal facilities throughout the country in 1977. They took place on a notable scale in Ottawa, St. John's, Saskatoon, Sherbrooke, London, and Windsor. Many of these were concerned with questions of automation, although some (like that in Sherbrooke) were in defence of fired union officials. These walkouts were preceded by violations of the collective agreement by management in the areas of automation and elsewhere.

Hard fought contractual rights concerning staffing, classifications, seniority, training, retraining, relocation and individual work measurement have been callously swept aside by the Employer in his quest for mechanization. The result has been work disruptions, deteriorating morale and thousands of grievances.<sup>45</sup>

The national union contract expired on 30 June 1977. The strategy of the national

<sup>45</sup> CUPW submission, 1978, 16.

union in negotiations with the employer was to present a long and detailed submission to the conciliation board, consisting of photographs of working conditions, displays, and a lengthy written report. The union also urged members to grieve all contract violations, including those often settled locally by informal negotiations on the shopfloor. Ten thousand contract violations were claimed by the union in 1977 alone, while the number accumulated and unresolved from the period beginning in December 1975 was over 50,000.

Combined with this enormous backlog of unsolved grievances was the nagging issue of term employees. The postal plants had failed to increase productivity to the point where these workers could be discharged, as the post office had hoped. Many of these workers had been on probation for much longer than the originally announced seven-month term — some for over two years.

Workers in Toronto expected a hard-fought strike in 1978. When Toronto Transit Commission workers were ordered back to work after a four-day strike and forced to accept declines in real wages, losses of contract rights, and benefits, postal workers came to expect that the same might be in store for them. However, the determination to strike was strong and was demonstrated in the strike by mail drivers in September 1978. Striking drivers on the picket line at South Central were joined by CUPW shop stewards, and almost all inside workers joined the pickets. This took local management by surprise. It was rumoured at the time that the disciplinary notices for CUPW stewards had been printed up before the picket was established, since management was expecting only stewards among CUPW members to respect the picket. The shop steward organization in Toronto, however, was much better in 1978 than in 1974, and the South Central plant was easier to picket because it had fewer entrances than the old postal terminal.

Many postal workers still have bitter memories of the 1978 strike. Negotiations had continued for sixteen months, with the union in a legal position to strike. When workers at South Central heard on the radio on the evening of 16 October that negotiations had broken down and that the national union was calling a strike, workers streamed out of the plant. Pickets were set up immediately and there was a very militant spirit.

The federal government reacted quickly, with both leading bourgeois parties passing back-to-work legislation in one day. This "Act to provide for the resumption and continuation of postal services" ordered the union to announce an end to the strike and to disband all picket lines. A mediator-arbitrator was to be appointed and empowered to write a binding contract for the post office. A return to work was ordered for Wednesday, 18 October.

The national union announced that it would defy the legislation, and continue picketing all postal facilities. Across the country, postal workers created mass pickets, and with numerous postal mail truck drivers on the lines, the postal plants were surrounded. At the South Central and Gateway plants in Toronto, mass pickets at each entrance discouraged scabbing.

However, the union's resistance was broken several days later when CUPW was abandoned by the Canadian Labour Congress, which refused to call a national general strike, and by "CLC president Denis McDermot's explicit attack on the union."<sup>36</sup> The RCMP raided union offices around the country and arrested the entire national executive board of CUPW. Management threatened mass firings if workers did not return to the plants. In Toronto, a mass meeting of several thousand union members broke up in chaos when a telegram was read from the national president, Jean-Claude Parrot, ordering a return to work. The meeting resounded with calls for the continuation of the strike, but the local executive disbanded the meeting as pandemonium took over. In Montreal, a similar meeting ended with workers marching out en masse to enter the downtown postal facility as a united group.

The intimidation of postal workers during and after the 1977 wildcat in Toronto and the 1975 strike in Montreal played a part in the events of 1978. Many workers were gravely concerned for their jobs, fearing mass dismissals. In Toronto, while the mass meeting was occurring, hundreds of workers were already in the postal plants. One can only speculate about the course of the strike if continued defiance had been called for by the national union.

After the strike, management attempted to institute a new disciplinary reign at South Central. A cautious but deliberate resistance was used by workers to tame supervisors made belligerent by state suppression of the strike. Although work resumed, many people talked of a permanent slow-down to vent their anger and frustration. But the 1978 strike had a lasting effect in that postal workers are less willing to engage in illegal strikes. Many feel the union will only cave in again, and this has weakened overt militancy considerably.

The years from 1977 to 1979 were years of bitterness for postal workers. Conditions in the new facilities are physically dangerous. Of all disabling injuries in the entire federal civil service, 53 per cent occur in the post office, and the injury rate for postal workers is twice as high as the rate for workers in private industry in Ontario.<sup>37</sup> Shopfloor militancy has also declined, in part because of the degrading reality of work in these plants: overhead conveyor lines, massive machinery, and identification cards, combined with monotony and noise.

The settlement forced on postal workers after the 1978 strike contained serious contractual losses: the return of a system of productivity counts on groups of workers. Productivity measurements were conducted in Toronto. In the 1980 contract negotiations, these measurements were abandoned and the postal work day was reduced by 30 minutes and a paid lunch period conceded. These concessions reflect the cautious support of CUPW by the CLC — as long as CUPW pursues "bread and butter" unionism.

<sup>36</sup> Panitch and Swartz, "Towards Permanent Exceptionalism," 154.

<sup>37</sup> CUPW National Program of Demands, 1980.

## V

## Conclusion

POSTAL WORKERS ARE less overtly militant in the 1980s, in contrast to the wildcats and sit-downs which characterized the 1970s. The threat of dismissal is real, and comes from both the discipline imposed on postal workers in the 1970s and from the danger of long-term unemployment. The hierarchical structure of the workplace, with its developed "internal labour market," also tends to lessen militancy in a period of serious unemployment. As Michael Burawoy shows in *Manufacturing Consent*,<sup>38</sup> management has codified, with the complicity of unions, a bureaucratic system whereby workers in many enterprises become an "industrial citizenry" in an internal industrial state with its own hierarchical structure. In the case of the post office, through the seniority system, postal workers can move out of the large plants to the smaller postal stations in the cities in which they live. Here they work as wicket clerks and mail-sorters, for the most part on day shifts, and here in many cases labour and management co-exist in close daily contact. All mail is hand-sorted for the area around the station. In the small postal stations, most supervisors are keenly aware of the necessity for the active consent and willing participation of postal workers if a station is to work efficiently. In the modern "letter processing plants" the tactics of "unofficial breaks," "dogging it," and so on are increasingly less effective on the shopfloor as working conditions remain degrading and abominable.

Daily battles on the shopfloor are not just isolated incidents of anecdotal value. It is here that the working class proves its strength. Its first, often unrecorded, battles are on the shopfloor, and here the basis of unity for more open struggles — in the bargaining arena, and (in Canada only potentially) in working-class parties — is created. These struggles are not just about more money or better contract language. They are struggles by workers to humanize the work setting — struggles against the one-sidedness, the narrowness, the deadening nature of the capitalist division of labour. These struggles contain a practical vision of a fuller expression of our human capacities as workers. It is here that the richest experience of the working class is evident in daily battles to gain a measure of control over the workplace. Often these struggles involve workers enacting their own plans for production and cooperation. While management would never admit it in writing, many "front-line supervisors" implicitly recognize their dependence upon workers' self-organization and cooperation in the process of production. Despite their public image, many postal workers take pride in their capacity to move the mail and in the measure of control they do exert over their work, even with the poor working conditions and daily stupidities of management which prevail in the postal plants.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labour Process under Monopoly Capitalism* (Chicago 1979), 113-20.

CUPW's militancy is striking (no pun intended) in contrast to many other unions. But unions under capitalism are defensive, not offensive, organizations. CUPW has almost always reacted to management's attempts to gain more control over the workers' labour power. Only when shopfloor struggles erupted into strikes, as with the national sit-down/wildcats of 1974, has the union been on the offensive. Only then were real concessions wrested from the employer in relation to movement to the new postal plants.

CUPW has often found itself strangled by federal labour law. Joe Davidson, CUPW president in the mid-1970s, called them "a well-laid legal snare from which there seemed to be no escape."<sup>39</sup> Labour law has created persistent problems in terms of the mobilization of the membership and in terms of union structure. Thus, despite a public reputation of militancy and illegal strikes, we have seen that it is actually the CUPW union officials which went to great lengths to stay within the boundaries of the law while management had little or no fear of breaking it or changing it to suit their own purposes. This is essentially what happened in the creation of the PSSRA, which allowed a legal cover for the post office's attack on workers, and in the 1978 strike, when a legal strike which threatened to win substantial gains was made illegal.

Despite all this history, it is a measure of the achievement of CUPW that Parrot is able to say "... of what we got in our collective agreement today, probably half of it was considered illegal in 1968..."<sup>40</sup> Compare this to a statement made in 1972 by J.R. Fultz, a post office official: "We hope to cut down the handling of mail by humans by about two-thirds, putting more capital into the system and mechanizing. This in turn should slow down the need for postal increases and should increase the quality of service."<sup>41</sup> Considering the situation with the post office today, this is an admission of failure on management's part. At the same time, postal workers can justifiably feel proud of their status. When considered beside the changes management wanted to make, postal workers have won considerable concessions against tremendous odds. The ability to continue to win in the future depends on whether union officials in CUPW can once again tap into the daily struggles on the shopfloor and break through the legal quagmire created by the state.

<sup>39</sup> Davidson and Deverell, *Davidson*, 97.

<sup>40</sup> Parrot, interview, 55.

<sup>41</sup> *Globe and Mail*, 7 September 1972, 3.