

Atlantic Issues

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What is wrong with the Post Office?

You've just put stamps on your letter or light bill. This time last year, the same letter cost 8c to mail. In September it went to 10c — now it's 12c. The extra postage is supposed to help pay for the \$1 billion postal automation programme, and chances are your letter will take at least as long to reach its destination as a letter would have taken a year ago. If you're like many people today, you'd probably rather put "your 2 cents' worth" anywhere else than on that envelope.

The Post Office is not the most popular of government services these days. While few departments are escaping taxpayers' annoyance at higher costs for doubtful services, the Post Office is too big and too visible to ease out of the glare of public opinion. Many other issues have aroused people's anger — the Judges' Affair, Lockheed, or in this region the operations of Shaheen in Newfoundland, Bricklin in New Brunswick and MAGI in Nova Scotia — but they have come and gone, while the Post Office issue remains. Every day, slow delivery and expensive rates irritate many taxpayers.

What is wrong with the Post Office? What do the postal workers want? Why are there constant strikes and a seeming deterioration of services? Why can't they settle differences peacefully? This summer, the contract between the Post Office and its inside workers will be up for renegotiation. Before the debate heats up, *Atlantic Issues* would like to examine the problem of the Post Office.

by Eleanor MacLean

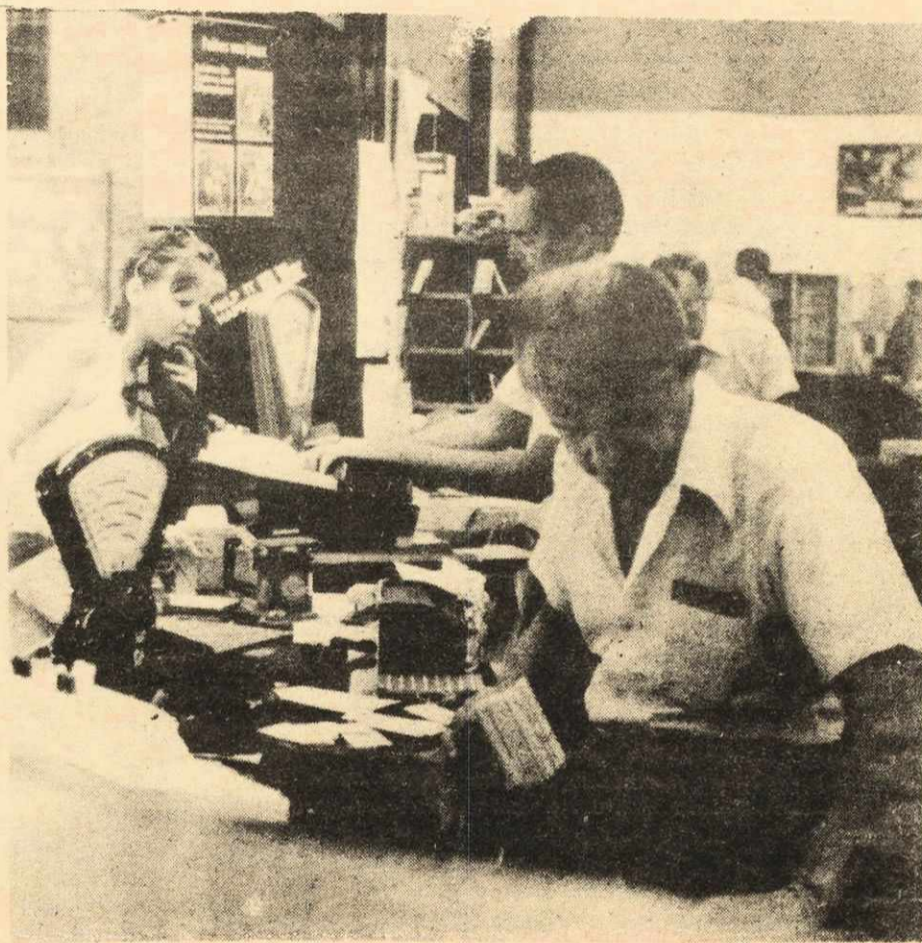
The Canadian Post Office has 50,000 people on its payroll. Of these, over 22,000 are inside postal workers organized into the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW). The others are members of the Letter Carriers' Union, the Public Service Alliance of Canada, and the Association of Postal Officers. In the past, other collective agreements have followed the CUPW contract.

Next July, bargaining for a new postal contract will involve several contentious issues. Casual labour and a manual dexterity test are major questions. But at the heart of the disagreement between the two sides is automation.

Briefly, the first two issues: The estimated 3,000 "term" or casual employees are not covered by collective agreements, yet are regularly used in the Post Office's daily operations. The union will be demanding that the P.O. hire full-, half-, part-time and relief employees as bona fide postal workers, rather than a pool of cheap, untrained labour. Difficulties with the manual dexterity test are also anticipated. A postal worker must encode 1,000 letters an hour for the mechanized system with 99% accuracy, in order to attain the minimum efficiency of the system. And after 6 months, 1,800 letters per hour are required, with 99% accuracy. Many employees lack the manual dexterity to encode this many letters at this level of accuracy. About 40% of those who took the 7-minute test in one Toronto plant failed it.

Automation

The overriding question troubling postal workers, however, is automation. Automation of the Post Office was begun in 1972, and when it is completed, the estimated cost to the Canadian taxpayer will be \$1 billion. While it will most noticeably affect postal workers in Central Canada, where the main plants and population are, the problems it brings affect the 1,750 postal workers in the Atlantic as well. At present, there are mechanized plants in St. John, New Brunswick, and St. John's, Newfoundland, and there are plans for ones in



Confidential report links management incompetence with employee unrest.

Halifax, Nova Scotia (1978), and Moncton, New Brunswick (1980).

Technological change

When work is mechanized, machines of course take the place of people. When it is automated, machines can produce work for other machines, and all the work can be controlled by a small staff with the aid of computers and other electronic devices.

What are the problems with postal automation?

Technical. From a technical point of view, there can be many problems, as there seem to have been in Canada. The 27½-acre Gateway plant in Toronto (cost so far: \$90 million) is still "practising" with dummy mail after a year, and

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operations in the other 2 mechanized plants are already behind schedule because of computer problems. "I think someone misjudged how long it would take to write the programmes for this system" says Plant Manager Allan Davies (*Financial Times*, 22 Nov. 76). Technical problems also arise if other procedures needed for the system don't work out as planned: after 6 years, the postal code is being used in only slightly more than half the mail. The result? Huge areas in each of the new Toronto plant are still temporary locations for the manual sorting of mail.

Personnel. There are many personnel problems associated with automation in the post office, but perhaps one of the more glaring problems is that by 1980 2,000 jobs will be lost in Toronto, 1,800 in Montreal, and a total of

6,000 across the country. From labour's point of view, a brief history of automation in the region will show how this problem is related to others in the Post Office.

Automation in the Atlantic region

Article 29

This article of the Collective Agreement dates from the December 5 settling of the long "Christmas" postal strike of 1975. In it, the P.O. management agrees to "eliminate all injustices to or adverse effects on employees" when it brings in machinery for the internal processing of mail. This includes "equipment different in nature, type or quantity from that previously utilized by the P.O. Department, a change, related to the introduction of this equipment, in the manner in which the P.O. Department carries on internal processing of mail and any change in work methods and postal services operations affecting one or more employees." *St. John, N.B.*

In February 1976, postal employees were asked to move, with no notice, to a new mechanized plant. Post Office management denied that this move to a new plant constituted a technological change.

St. John's, Newfoundland

In May 1976, postal employees were supposed to move into the new Kenmount Road mechanized plant in St. John's even though due consultation had not taken place. They countered by stating in a letter that they did not wish to move to the new premises. Post Office management replied with a letter informing them of their new place of work, and stating that if they did not comply with the call to work, they could be dismissed.

Two months later in July, the Jolliffe decision upheld the postal employees' position on the move. However, as of April 1977, nearly