

Gazette interview

Robert Andstein is the President of the 425 member Nova Local of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW). Following the legislation which made their strike illegal and eventually forced the postal workers back to work, Andstein was suspended (with a recommendation for dismissal) by the post office for, "actions prior to and during the strike." Although Andstein is appealing the suspension, until his appeal is heard he remains without pay. Similar cases within the post office have taken up to two years before being resolved. Following his suspension, Gail Picco and Marc Allain of the Gazette spoke with Andstein about the recent strike and some of the problems within the post office.

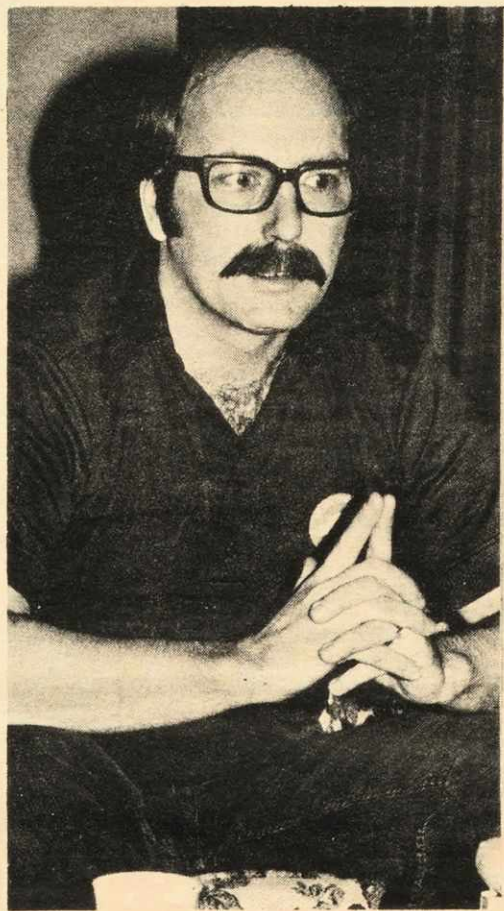
Gazette: Do you think the demands of the postal workers were sufficiently elaborated upon by the media to give the public enough knowledge to understand what the strike was about?

Andstein: I think the demands of the union were basically bastardized. That is, they were taken to an extreme and not explained. They picked on the thirty hour work week with no explanation at all and they picked on the concept of having 10 minute breaks every hour. Basically why we're going after a thirty hour work week is because within two years 25% of the workers are going to be laid off. That's between 6000-8000 workers. So what can a union do? The union has a basic responsibility to the workers in that union, therefore instead of having a reduction of 25% of our workers, it reduces the work week by 25% to keep the same number of workers. In terms of the ten minute break every hour, we put that in because more and more workers are becoming coders / groupers / sorters which means you have to sit at a machine and code 1800 letters per hour which is one every two seconds. So you have to hit six buttons every two seconds. It takes out your mind and makes it part of that machine. So we want a break every hour so people on that machine can have a rest from it. That was never explained out. And they really bastardized the wage package and never explained it. We were basically going after 88c and they wanted to wipe that out and give us 41c. We spent 18 months in negotiations and the post office department waited 15 months to make a counter proposal to our demands and they said our position had never changed within 15 months. Finally they came out and offered us 22 rollbacks and a decrease in wages for over 1,000 dollars a year. People became more interested in the demands than what was happening with the injunction and the RCMP.

Gazette: After the strike in 1975, the Financial Post saw the problem in the post office as a lack of good management and the military-like atmosphere that they attributed to the large number of ex-servicemen in post office management positions. Do you think this was accurate and is it still true today?

Andstein: Sure it was accurate in 1975 and has been accurate for many, many

Postie's turn



Robert Andstein, President Nova local Canadian Union of Postal Workers

years. Judge Montpetit made the same analysis in 1965. In the main Post Office downtown 75% of the supervisors have obtained their positions through paternalism and nepotism and not through their capabilities. The Post Office has been built on that basis since the Second World War. Although the military people are now at the top, their type of thinking and philosophy is still with the line supervisors. In fact, when you apply to become a supervisor they ask you what your attitude is toward the union and what you would do if the union did such and such a thing.

Gazette: Why is CUPW pushing for a crown corporation?

Andstein: For two reasons. First, we have to fall under the Canada Labour Code, and secondly the Post Office management has to be almost entirely eliminated.

If the Post Office were a crown corporation, the workers would be placed under the Labour Code as opposed to the Public Servants Staff Relations Act. The PSSRA is extremely restrictive. Postal workers don't have the right to negotiate or even discuss things like promotion, demotion, hiring, firing, etc. We don't even have the right to negotiate wages, although we do because of our strength. Coming under the Labour Code would give us the right to negotiate in these areas; it would in fact open up whole new areas.

The second reason is to create an efficient Post Office postal system. There are a number of prerequisites to this. There has to be a complete re-organization of supervisors and management personnel nationally. I think it's our view that approximately 95% of management personnel in the Post Office at this time have to be replaced because they are incompetent, anti-worker, anti-union and anti-people. Many of them are racist and most of them are sexist. They don't care about the efficiency of the Post Office. Their main aim is how to attack the union.

When the Post Office becomes a crown corporation, the management of that corporation are going to have to become responsible unto itself and not have the tremendous fall back that the Post Office now has with the Federal government (in terms of capital and in terms of falling back on other departments).

Gazette: CUPW was one of the first Unions to oppose the Canadian Labour Congress' proposal for tri-partism. What are the implications of tri-partism and why does CUPW oppose it?

Andstein: The basic concept of tri-partism is that there is equal or near equal relationship between three parties: the workers represented by labour, the business sector represented by large corporations and the so-called impartial third party government. Now one has to be a goddamn fool to think that government is going to side with the workers. Now "Nickle" Joe Morris and Dennis McDermott feel that this system is a good one because their aim is not to defend the trade union movement and the interests of workers, but to ensure the continuation and the increase of profits. They create a maze to divert workers away from their struggles. The diversion is based on discussion at the top levels between the leaders of the trade union movement and the leaders of government and business.

That I think is the essence of the tri-partism and CUPW is opposed to it basically for that reason.

It cannot work. It hasn't worked any place in the world because of the basic characteristics of governments. They are funded by the large corporations and financial institutions and therefore work in their interests and not those of workers. For workers to think there can be collusion between themselves and government against big business is a total illusion.

Gazette: Senator Ray Perrault claims that the problems in the Post Office stem from an international communist conspiracy. Would you like to comment on this?

Andstein: Sure. I don't know where it's based but if M. Perrault would inform people of where it is, I'm sure a lot of workers would go there, for some encouragement and some analysis of national and international situations.

I think the reason this is being brought out is because there certainly are communists within CUPW and there certainly are communists in every sector of this society.

There are in fact a number of organizations in Canada that claim to be Marxist Leninist. Much of this movement came out of the student movement of the 1960's. Those students have become workers and the organizations they have formed have had a definite impact on the struggles of workers because the basic thing about communist workers is that they are working not in the interests of the corporations or government but in the interest of other workers.

Communists aren't the problem in Canada today . . . workers aren't the problem. The problems are in the economy with inflation and unemployment. The workers don't have any control over resolving that. Government and corporations have that control, but they can't resolve those problems. So the people can't become conscious in a deep way, there has to be a diversion away from the real problems. In that way, the problems become trade unions and communists. It's a very developed tactic.

Gazette: Some people have said that what happened to postal workers is an indication of things to come for all workers. Do you agree?

Andstein: Yes. We can see government moving towards binding arbitration or as the Conservatives call "the public service disputes commission" where the right to strike is being taken away from workers through repressive legislation and collusion with the CLC big-wigs like McDermott. The attack is not going to happen in a week or a month but is going to be systematically built up against the more militant unions. Eventually, an alternate system to strikes is going to be brought in. The propaganda has been coming out for a few years through newspaper editorials and everyone saying there must be an alternative to strikes. But the workers aren't saying that. The ultimate thing workers have is the right to withdraw their labour power. It's happening here in Nova Scotia. The new labour minister stepped in to arbitrate on the strike of workers in old folks homes. In that case he offered them the choice of being legislated back to work or binding arbitration. It happened to the Toronto transit workers and to the workers on the grain boats on the Great Lakes. We're going to see a lot more of it.

Gazette: Do you see it happening also in the private sector?

Andstein: Yes. Last week, the PC House leader Walter Baker said on a talk show that the proposed Public Service Disputes Commission would not only be dealing with the public sector but also the private sector. He said they wouldn't declare any section of workers essential but that they may declare them essential at any given time. That is, postal workers may be essential in the beginning of February because they have to get the Valentines out, or the workers at Dalhousie may be declared essential on Saturday morning because there was a party on Friday night and there is a lot of garbage so it's going to be very unhealthy for the students.

Gazette: What role did the RCMP play in the strike?

Andstein: The RCMP is the police force of the Federal government. It is there for the protection of the Federal government, and the corporations and financial institutions. A lot of people think the RCMP is this guy in a red suit with a brown boy scout hat charging around and looking nice. But right from their inception they were founded on the basis of repression and protection of corporate interests. At that time it was Hudson's Bay company and the CPR, but they've carried that basic role down through history so that the same thing exists in 1978.

Gazette: The rationale used to support Bill C-8 and the attack against the postal workers is that you provided an essential service. Do you feel that this is so?

Andstein: Even though the post office is the most socialized service in existence, the effects it has on the majority of people who are workers is minimal. This is 1978—the technological age. Just because one system breaks down doesn't mean the whole economy is disrupted. There are alternatives to moving the mail through the Post Office. They can move it by truck or air or they can use existing courier systems. Before the last strike they took cheques from Moncton by car directly to the Post Office to be sorted. During the strike they moved cheques from Moncton to every centre in the Maritimes. We also know that they can set up alternate systems to sort the mail like they did at the Armories. The department of Supply and Services, in fact, right here in Halifax can make any kind of government cheque. But the government doesn't tell people that.