

by Paul Mitchell

(CUP) - The long and bitter struggle between the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and the federal government has once again surfaced in its full intensity this year as the union and government try to negotiate a new collective agreement.

The issues in this negotiation are many and encompass long standing grievances of ten years or more. Also heightening this year's confrontation is the Postal Worker's disenchantment with their wages which haven't risen in more than 21 months. The union itself has been without a collective agreement since October 1974.

But the root of the problems in the Post Office this year can be traced to two elements. A history of poor employee-employer relations and the struggle over technological change and the resulting threat to job security.

This year the union states that the vital question of technological change, job security and some of the smaller, but very important issues, must be cleared up if there is going to be any hope for labour peace in the Post Office.

Compounding the situation is the Public Service Staff Relations Act, which prohibits Postal Workers, and all public servants, from negotiating the effects of technological change, job security and classifications. These restrictions are not contained in the Canada Labour Code which governs unionized workers under federal jurisdiction in the private sector.

The union is not opposed to automation and believes in the need to update Canada's outdated mail handling facilities. But the union wants some say in this transformation and protection from its effects.

Paul Mitchell is an information officer with the Canadian Union of Postal Workers. He explains the union's viewpoint in the current confrontation.

The union's goal this year is to gain wage, job and classification security for its members and some positive benefits from the automation program.

Along with the current struggle over automation is the union's attempt to solve some of the smaller issues which have plagued the Post Office for years.

These include the use of casual labour, a re-structuring of the grievance procedure, week-end premiums for workers whose regular shifts fall on the weekend and some extra incentive for workers who have to work night shifts.

The problems in the Post Office have been surveyed, reviewed and documented many times since the first National Postal strike in 1965.

This strike led to a Royal Commission on Working Conditions in the Post Office chaired by Judge Andre Monpetit. His report, tabled in 1965, documented the Post Office as being riddled with paternalism, nepotism, favouritism and neglect. The judge's report pointed out the need for collective bargaining to protect Postal Worker's rights.

The government introduced legislation in 1965 which gave all government employees the right to strike but placed many severe restrictions on collective bargaining.

This legislation and the problems resulting from the government's failure to implement the recommendations of the Monpetit report, led to further National Postal strikes in 1968 and 1970. Since then the Post Office has been faced with a series of work stoppages, slowdowns and other signs of worker discontent.

Another major problem in the Post Office is the division of responsibility for its operation and the large number of unions in the Post Office which can all stop mail service to some degree.

This division of responsibility has led to calls from the union to make the Post Office a Crown Corporation under the Canada Labour Code which would

consolidate authority for the Post Office and end the Postal Worker's legislative problems.

As it now stands the Post Office Department is responsible for the daily operation of the Post Office. But the Treasury Board is the real employer of Postal Workers and must agree to any contract before it is signed. The Public Service Commission has the responsibility for hiring all Post Office personnel and the Department of Public Works looks after the maintenance of Postal facilities.

This division of authority often leads to a great deal of buck passing which further frustrates Postal Workers.

When the public is faced with a strike in the Post Office it tends to blame either the CUPW which represents 22,000 inside workers or the Letter Carriers of Canada which represents 16,000 Letter Carriers.

However, there are 22 different unions in the Post Office which can, if on strike, all cause the public some degree of inconvenience. CUPW has always advocated one union in the Post Office but the government has consistently refused to allow this because it is in their interest to have several unions to play off against each other during contract negotiations.

While these problems bear significantly on the negotiations this year and must eventually be solved before there can be real peace in the Post Office, this year the Postal Workers are trying to resolve the biggest problem they have faced yet — automation.

Automation and the Postal Code Boycott

CUPW instituted a Boycott the Postal Code campaign almost two years ago as its main weapon in trying to force the government to give Postal Workers the right to negotiate the effects of technological change.

The Postal Code is the key to the automation process and the system will not work unless 77 per cent of all mail is ultimately coded.

The automation and modernization program in the Post Office started as a result of recommendations contained in "A Blueprint for Change", a massive government study on the Post Office completed in 1969 for then Postmaster General, Eric Kierans.

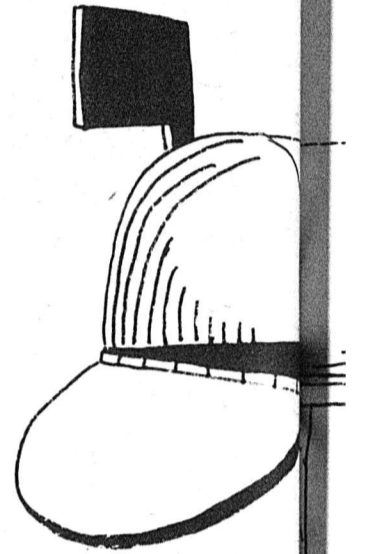
The program, which has already started, calls for the expenditure of more than one billion dollars on buildings and equipment in 27 urban centres. The spending is concentrated mainly in Toronto and Montreal as more than half the country's mail passes through these two centres.

The automation and mechanization program involves the use of very sophisticated machinery. The first step in the automation and mechanization program involves the use of very sophisticated machinery. The first step in the automated process is the Culler Facer Cancellor which cancels and faces mail all one way in preparation for sorting.



U of A will be hard hit

Anything for mail in the mail today?



Any mail the

It also rejects any mail thicker than three-eighths of an inch, with bent corners or mail containing anything such as a paper clip or staple. It also rejects any mail smaller than three and one half inches by five and one half inches or larger than six inches by ten inches. All rejected mail is sorted manually.

Mail then proceeds to the coding suites where operators read the postal code, if the mail has one, and key the code on the letters so it can be translated by the Letter Sorting Machines. It does this by placing small yellow bars on the envelopes.

Mail is then sent through the Letter Sorting Machine which can sort 23,500 letters per hour to 288 different locations. The machine's programming can be changed to run the letters through several times for a finer sortation.

Full automation, which will follow the completion of the mechanization process, involves the introduction of the Optical Character Reader. This is the ultimate in automated mail sortation machinery and will eventually replace the key coders and manual sorters.

Using computer programming and electronic scanning devices it can translate typewritten postal codes at the rate of 30,000 per hour, and put the yellow bars on the envelopes. From the OCR the letters go to the LSM for sorting.

This automation program will be supplemented by an extensive mechanization of mail handling facilities. Mail will be moved by containerized transport, a machine will empty and shake out mailbags and conveyor systems will move the mail inside the plant. Machines will also be introduced which can sort large envelopes.

The new technology is enormously labour saving because a Postal Clerk following the old manual sortation methods, is only expected to sort a maximum of 1,800 letters per hour.

The introduction of the new technology will also vastly alter the work schedules of Postal Workers and could change their classifications.

Besides relying on the automated machinery the Post Office is circumventing the union's position and its control over the workplace by following policies designed to take work out of the union's hands.

The Post Office has started to hire large numbers of casual labour, who receive lower wages than Postal Workers, have no union protection or job security. It has also hired many term employees who have contracts which only allow them to work for terms of three, six or 12 months.

The effect of this large casual work force is to deny the hiring of badly needed full time Postal Workers. It has been estimated that the use of casual labour has meant the equivalent of 4,000 full time jobs.

The government is also applying pressure on special permit holders to pre-sort their mail before it reaches the Post Office. In the past unionized Postal Workers have always sorted all mail but

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