

Thanks, but no thanks for unsolicited advice



William H. Young

In my line of work, you get a lot of unsolicited advice. When it comes from letter carriers or other people you respect, it pays to sit up and listen. But what do you do when it comes from less credible quarters? That's my dilemma because, oddly, the president of the APWU has been using his online updates to comment on this union's policies to his members and the world at large.

In recent months, President Burrus has felt the need to criticize the NALC and other postal unions over postal reform, branding their leaders as "fools" for working to shape "bad" legislation. He routinely demonizes the nation's major mailers. Indeed, he once famously referred to the customers who generate the majority of the Postal Service's volume—and revenue—as "vermin." I try to ignore comments like these and usually I succeed.

But on March 1, Bill Burrus published something so ridiculous and contrary to the interests of city carriers and other postal employees (including his own members) that I must respond.

In a web posting called "Strange Bedfellows," he lauded the views of a right-wing think tank called the Institute for Research on the Economics of Taxation. IRET is an anti-union lobbying outfit financed by conservative ideologues and corporations that has attacked the pay and benefits of unionized postal employees, supported gutting our collective bargaining rights and favors the privatization of the Postal Service. Strange bedfellows indeed.

What gives? In February, IRET issued a "Congressional Advisory" arguing that new delivery points are an "asset" to the USPS, not a burden. New deliveries are self-financing, they say, since new households and businesses generate and receive mail. Burrus embraces this view as backing his contention that postal reform was not necessary.

Of course, this line of thought ignores the real issue—what matters is what is happening to the volume of mail addressed to the 145 million existing delivery points. Nobody ever claimed the cost of serving an ever-expanding number of delivery points was the sole ra-

tionale for postal reform—it was only part of the story. As NALC members know, the real threat to the long-term viability of the Postal Service is declining First-Class Mail volume and a worsening of the mix of mail (a shift toward lower-value Standard Mail), combined with rising overhead costs associated with new deliveries.

The IRET paper offers very little convincing data to back its claims, but it happily cites Burrus's anti-reform testimony to the Senate in 2005 as evidence. And it argues that new delivery points can be served by contract delivery carriers. Wait a minute—does APWU now support contracting out?

Clearly, it's foolish to get in bed with outfits like IRET, but this case is especially troubling. The bogus argument that universal service is an asset, not a burden, is being used by right-wingers all over the world to justify elimination of postal monopolies—and IRET is using it in Washington today to poison the rule-making process for the new Postal Service.

NALC makes no apologies for its leadership role on postal reform. The language on work-sharing discounts was important, but we are not a one-trick pony. Years of work by NALC and its allies—on language to keep universal service and a monopoly, on non-interference in collective bargaining, on the mediation language, on the escrow and military pension money, on the numerous rate-setting issues, and on eliminating the FECA cuts at retirement age—will benefit all postal employees for decades to come. APWU was nowhere to be found on these issues, but its members should be thankful we were there to fight for them.

Besides, all the chest pounding in the world doesn't change one simple fact. Postal reform was finally passed by the Senate unanimous consent rules—an objection from just one out of the 100 senators would have killed it. President Burrus either did not have the courage of his convictions or he lacked the clout to find a single member of the Senate to stand up for him. Let's all keep an eye on that website—maybe we'll find out which is true. ☒