



The elephant in the kangaroo courtroom

Last month, the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform held a hearing called “Are Postal Workforce Costs Sustainable?” It was aimed at scrutinizing the tentative negotiated agreement between the United States Postal Service and the American Postal Workers Union.

It was an unprecedented congressional hearing, putting Congress back into the business of politicizing postal labor relations and interfering in the postal collective-bargaining process.

I watched the hearing from my office in DC, hoping that my loud objections could somehow float across Constitution Avenue and be placed in the record.

The blame game that has been conducted all across this country has found its way to Washington. Governors in several states have been blaming their financial woes on the collective-bargaining rights of their workers. This simply is not true. We all know the true agenda is to bust unions. But that hasn’t stopped them from introducing legislation that would strip workers of collective-bargaining rights all in the name of fiscal responsibility.

And in the committee hearing, that theme also emerged. The hearing clearly aimed to discredit the APWU-USPS agreement and raise doubts about the collective-bargaining process itself.

But the fact is that the financial woes of the Postal Service have nothing to do with labor costs and everything to do with the 2006 congressional mandate that the USPS pre-fund future retiree health benefits to the tune of \$5.5 billion a year. Without that requirement, the Postal Service would have been profitable over the past four years.

Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe repeatedly pointed out that reforming the retiree health benefits pre-funding mandate and gaining access to USPS surpluses in the Civil Service Retirement System and the Federal Employees Retirement System are key pieces in the financial puzzle. But for every instance where Donahoe made that case, anti-labor members of the committee returned to criticizing the APWU-USPS agreement.

Here is the bottom line: Congress played a part in the financial problem the Postal Service currently finds itself

in, because Congress mandated the \$5.5 billion-a-year payment to pre-fund retiree health benefits. Congress has the power to instruct the Office of Personnel Management to recalculate and determine what the overpayment in the CSRS fund is and transfer that money back to the Postal Service. Calculations already done by two independent agencies estimate the overpayment to be between \$50 billion and \$75 billion. The Postal Service then could use that money toward the remaining pre-funding liability. Congress can then change the law requiring the \$5.5-billion-a-year payment, since there will no longer be a need for it.

The claim that the Postal Service is asking for a taxpayer bailout simply is not true. Not one penny of taxpayer money goes to the Postal Service and hasn’t for more than 25 years. And the funds sitting in the CSRS pension fund that we are asking to be transferred are overpayments by the Postal Service. It’s the Postal Service’s money, not taxpayer funds, and therefore not a taxpayer bailout.

Last month’s hearing was used as an opportunity to attack universal service, attack collective-bargaining rights and push for lower wages and benefits for workers instead of really tackling the issue at hand. But in light of what’s been happening all across this country, it was really no surprise.

President Rolando had stated before that we should stand with our fellow union brothers and sisters because not only is it the right thing to do, but we surely will be next. Well, next is now.

It’s going to take all of us standing together and working with our friends on Capitol Hill and elsewhere for Congress to do the right thing.

As sickened as we all are about what is happening across this great country of ours, keep in mind that if we rise up together, we will win this war on the working class. Every worker in every state that is under attack has not been alone. We will not be alone in our fight either.

It will not be easy; nothing worthwhile ever is. But we will succeed. ✉