

The Postal Service embraces 'bad-faith' bargaining



There have been 12 rounds of collective bargaining with the United States Postal Service since postal reorganization in 1971. The 13th round began on Aug. 18 in the most ominous way possible. With the Postal Service headed toward insolvency due to the congressional mandate to massively pre-fund future retiree health benefits in the midst of the worst recession in decades, the USPS has embraced the kind of bad-faith bargaining that is running rampant in America right now.

Everywhere you look, bad-faith bargaining—or worse, non-bargaining—abounds. Some Republican governors, such as Wisconsin's Scott Walker and Ohio's John Kasich, have used recession-induced budget deficits to strip the collective-bargaining rights of public employees in their states rather than negotiate fairly with them.

Meanwhile, in the Congress, a radicalized GOP has demonstrated that it would rather risk a catastrophic default on the national debt, which actually caused the first downgrade of credit rating in modern times, than negotiate in good faith to reduce massive budget deficits. Of course, those massive deficits were caused in large part by the very policies Republicans voted for over the past 30 years—the deregulation of Wall Street, tax cuts for the rich and unfunded wars overseas.

Now the Postal Service has jumped on the bad-faith bandwagon. How else to explain the Postal Service's decision, one week before the opening of bargaining with the NALC, to launch a coordinated campaign in Congress and the media to gut the collective-bargaining rights of postal employees?

The Postal Service released two "white papers." One asks Congress to repeal the no-layoff provisions in the labor contracts the USPS has negotiated with its unions—in order to layoff 120,000 postal employees over the next four years even as another 100,000 employees retire. The other calls on Congress to pass a law that (1) permits the Postal Service to unilaterally withdraw its employees from FEHBP and the CSRS and FERS pension plans, and (2) gives it the right to unilaterally establish management-controlled health and pension plans with drastically reduced benefits for all postal employees—without negotiating with its unions.

This act of bad faith, seven days before the beginning of our bargaining, should be seen for what it is: a declaration of war on letter carriers. Rather than bargaining with us on health benefits, layoff protection and, indirectly, even pension coverage, the USPS decided to join the GOP war on public employees and the American labor movement.

The move is all the more outrageous because it came with little warning and no discussion with NALC. The nation's letter carriers deserve much better, especially after three years in which we have worked tirelessly to help the Postal Service respond and adapt to the economic crisis, including four rounds of route adjustments to boost productivity and maintain service quality.

Of course, the Postal Service can complain that the worsening economy and the inability and unwillingness of Congress to address the impending insolvency of the Postal Service are forcing its hand. Indeed, it has justified its proposals by falsely claiming that the USPS would have already filed for bankruptcy if it were a private company—when we know that we would not have been forced to pay \$21 billion for future retiree health benefits over the past four years if the USPS were private.

But the disastrous economy is no excuse. We have to work together to preserve the long-term viability of the Postal Service. Going to war with your employees by adopting the worst tactics of political extortionists like Scott Walker is a prescription for disaster.

NALC is committed to doing its part at the collective-bargaining table to overcome the economic crisis, including the possibility that the weak "technical" recovery will falter and become a double-dip recession. But Congress must do its part—by addressing the real cause of the Postal Service's financial crisis: the unfair retiree health pre-funding mandate that caused 100 percent of the losses and new debt incurred by the USPS over the past four fiscal years.

The Postal Service should stop its lurch toward Scott Walker-style labor relations, end its unilateral "my way or the highway" approach, and work with us at the bargaining table and on Capitol Hill to find mutually acceptable solutions. ☒