

The PMG adds insult to injury —USPS is not like Greece



In June, I appeared at a postal industry conference called “Postal Vision 2020,” where organizers tried to get everyone involved in the mailing industry to think creatively about the future of the Postal Service. There were a number of very interesting presentations that urged the Postal Service to think of its networks as “platforms” from which new services could be launched. The examples of Google and Amazon and other innovators were frequently invoked.

Unfortunately, these optimistic possibilities appeared to be lost on Postmaster General Pat Donahoe, who doubled down on his blinkered vision of the future by once again outlining his plans to radically downsize the unique and unmatched universal delivery network that postal employees have built up over the past 200 years.

The PMG’s speech was disappointing, but not surprising. I didn’t expect much from the man who turned his back on 10 years of progress in strategic engagement with NALC on route evaluations and joint problem-solving earlier this year when he abandoned both JARAP and productive talks on a new contract. The fact that this engagement, begun soon after the anthrax attacks in 2001, boosted productivity to record levels and helped the Postal Service weather the worst recession in 80 years did not seem to matter.

My hopes were not high for a leader who betrayed postal employees everywhere earlier this year when he effectively endorsed H.R. 2309—a bill that would destroy 200,000 jobs and strip postal employees of their collective-bargaining rights. The fact that he and the Board of Governors have refused to stand up to demagogic politicians or to fight for fairness on pre-funding and a fair shake on both CSRS and FERS pension surpluses is not news to anyone.

But I was nonetheless angered by the PMG’s presentation when he insisted on comparing the situation facing the Postal Service to that facing Greece. Fairly or unfairly, Greece is seen as a place rife with corruption where bloated public payrolls have led to huge deficits and financial ruin. This right-wing talking point insults the hundreds of thousands of letter carriers and other postal employees who have worked tirelessly to preserve the Postal Service through the worst

crisis in its history, enduring massive and painful downsizing while providing the world’s most efficient delivery service to mailers and residents alike.

It also lets off the hook the folks who have destroyed the Postal Service’s finances—the politicians who imposed and have refused to lift the unfair and unaffordable burden to pre-fund future retiree health benefits (accounting for 85 percent of all losses since 2007), the bureaucrats at OPM and GAO who have treated the USPS with gross unfairness on pensions, and postal management itself for meekly accepting these policies and adopting a doomed “shrink to survive” strategy that is driving business away. Every time the PMG announces another round of service cuts, the message to mailers is clear: “Run! We are failing.”

Our mission must be the same as the conference’s—to re-imagine the Postal Service for the 21st century. I was pleased to share our view that exploiting the untapped potential of the USPS last-mile delivery network is the key to our future.

That potential is evident with the exploding volume of packages that we deliver for FedEx and UPS every day. Moving up the value chain to deliver larger packages and capturing all the residential deliveries of the private companies, combined with a vibrant direct-mail business, can help us overcome the gradual loss of First Class mail to Internet delivery and lay the groundwork for other innovations using the last-mile delivery platform we have built.

The Postal Service could also take on “first-mile” duties for other delivery companies—why take blue collection boxes off the street, when we could be rebranding them for all delivery companies and providing collection services for all? Finding new civic uses for the Postal Service’s retail and processing networks—as branches of a national infrastructure bank or as high-tech recycling centers, for example—is also possible.

We can’t count on the Postal Service or the PMG to envision the future. We will have to take the lead ourselves. So as we gather in Minneapolis, ignore the insults, brothers and sisters; we have a lot of work to do. ☒