2025 UNI Global Union Post & Logistics World Conference

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Every four years, UNI Global Union holds its Post and Logistics World Conference, which brings together labor unions that represent postal employees from around the world to share information about challenges they are facing and to collaborate on ways to protect and improve jobs in the postal sector. This year the conference was held in Bangkok, Thailand. While NALC staff did not travel to attend the conference in person this year, there was an option to participate virtually. Over several nights in September, I joined the conference on Zoom.

One message became clear very quickly: Post offices around the world are in financial crisis and unions are hurrying to figure out how to best protect their members as governments take drastic measures to address a fundamental shift in the postal market.

Since 2000, every post office has seen a significant decline in letter mail volumes, and thus a significant decline in the revenue stream that has traditionally funded universal service. Post offices have traditionally operated under universal service obligations (USOs), which are legal mandates that require a post office to offer a baseline level of service to everyone at affordable rates. Strong USOs are what make post offices such strong public services; they ensure equal access to delivery no matter where someone lives. Providing this service is, of course, very expensive, so governments have granted post offices monopolies over letter mail to ensure that the USO can be paid for.

However, as letter volumes have declined due to the increase in electronic communication in the last two decades, post offices are no longer able to cover the cost of providing universal service. While the increase in parcel volumes in more recent years has helped to mitigate this crisis, there is private competition for the delivery of parcels, so post offices must compete with private companies for that business. All over the world, the loss of letter mail and the competition for parcels have left post offices struggling financially and unable to cover the cost of universal service.

Governments and post offices are responding to this situation in a few ways: weakening their once strong USOs, privatizing their postal systems, or diversifying the products and services their post office can offer. While each response is an attempt to address the financial burden of universal service, they represent different perspectives on how to do so. Weakening USOs and privatization typically result in reductions in the quality of service for the public, while diversification typically represents an intent to improve the quality of a public service. I'd like to share a few examples of each that were discussed during the conference.

Strikingly, this conference seemed to mark a sea change. In my nine years of attending UNI postal meetings, I do not remember a time when every country seemed to be reckoning with the same fundamental issue. In the past, while some minor struggles have been shared, the situation in each country has been different. In this case, however, no post office is immune.

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Many countries, especially many in Europe, have altered their USOs in recent years, including reducing the frequency of delivery, slowing the speed of delivery, reducing the geographic area that the USO covers, and redefining which products and services are covered by the USO.

Denmark is the most extreme example. Earlier this year, PostNord announced that it would cease all letter delivery by the end of the year because of persistent financial losses. Letter volume in Denmark has dropped by 90 percent since 2000, due to normal electronic substitution and to the Danish government's decision to move to an e-government model in the early 2000s, in which all official interactions with the government are done digitally rather than by mail. PostNord's red collection boxes are being removed from Danish streets and one-third of its workforce is being let go. 3F Post, the labor union that represents PostNord employees, addressed the conference and shared its union's fear that this USO change will lead to the casualization of postal jobs and the end of collective bargaining at PostNord. 3F Post officials warned that it is necessary to find allies and start political negotiations early to

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build support with enough time to stop these changes in other countries.

In another extreme example, the day after the conference ended the Canadian government announced that Canada Post will begin implementing cost-cutting measures like ending door-to-door delivery and shutting some rural post offices. While the government has stated that these measures are in response to Canada Post being in deep financial trouble, curiously the timing comes before a federal mandate review was set to begin in October to explore potential changes to ensure financial sustainability, and as negotiations with the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) have stalled for the third time in about two years. CUPW, which has been pushing back against any potential service and job cuts, immediately called for a nationwide strike, but it remains to be seen how this issue will be resolved.

Other countries have sought privatization as a solution, transferring the financial burden of universal service from the government to the private sector. While countries usually maintain regulations that determine the minimum level of service, privatization almost always reduces the quality and frequency of service while increasing prices.

In recent years the Indian government indicated it was considering taking steps that could lead to privatizing parts of India Post, such as fragmenting it into functional units—banking, delivery, insurance and others (India Post already offers diverse services)—before selling off certain parts. This news triggered widespread opposition from employees, unions and stakeholders across the country. Postal unions were concerned that privatization would severely damage the core mission of India Post, which is to serve the public, not generate a profit; and would lead to unaffordable rates, reductions in service in unprofitable locations, and loss of job security and collective-bargaining rights. The unions led a campaign and built a strong group of stakeholders around the message "Strengthen, Don't Sell," calling on the government to strengthen India Post as a public institution. The Indian government later indicated that it would not pursue implementation of its proposals.

In the UK, workers at Royal Mail are facing the threat of private equity. Royal Mail, which was privatized in 2013, was acquired by EP Group, a Czech private equity firm, this year. The Communication Workers Union (CWU), the union that represents Royal Mail employees, feared that EP Group would break the company up and sell off its assets, extract wealth without adequately investing in the network, cut postal services, attack pay and working conditions, or cut jobs. In response to these threats, CWU sought to secure an agreement with EP Group that would protect its members' jobs as well as the service the public relies on. CWU was able to achieve such an agreement, including assurances that the "gig economy" employment model would not be used and that the company would not be dismantled. However, Royal Mail's USO is currently under review and CWU fears that EP Group will use this as an opportunity to cut service in an effort to maximize profits.

In contrast, other countries are seeking to strengthen their postal systems with new revenue from diversified sources. Unlike weakening USOs or privatization, diversification can have positive effects on postal employees and the public.

Ghana, for example, has deliberately positioned Ghana Post as a national platform for social inclusion and has sought to add new services that fill gaps in public service throughout the country. Ghana Post has introduced government services, such as issuing passports and driver's licenses; and financial services, such as remittance of digital payments, to its post offices. It also has implemented a number of partnerships to make cross-border e-commerce smoother, which allows Ghanian citizens to more easily participate in that sector of the global economy. These initiatives create new postal jobs and benefit the public by making services more accessible. In a presentation to the conference, a Ghana Post representative noted that "each of these moves has one purpose: to show that the post is not dying, it is adapting."

Among all these countries making changes to their post offices in response to financial crisis, the future of the U.S. Postal Service seems to hang in the balance. USPS is certainly in financial distress—it lost $9.5 billion last year and is on track to end this year in a similar position—but there have not been whole-government moves toward changing the USO or privatizing postal services, though those ideas have certainly been floated. In fact, in contrast to the reduction in delivery frequency in many other countries, six-day delivery was codified into law in the United States in 2022. That said, I suspect a fight like those seen in Denmark or Canada about significant reductions to the USO, or in India about threats of privatization, is one we soon could be facing at home. This is the value of NALC's affiliation with UNI Global Union. We can learn from the experiences of other unions and strengthen our own fight to protect letter carrier jobs and universal service.