

APWU

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Moe Biller 1915 - 2003

Moe Biller, the APWU's President Emeritus, died Sept. 5 in New York. He was 87.

Our union's third national president, Morris Biller, who preferred to be called "Moe," led the APWU for more than 20 years.

"Moe was the hero of the U.S. postal workers movement," said William Burrus, Biller's successor. "From his first job as a part-time clerk he devoted himself to the labor movement. During his rise to the top he worked tirelessly not just for the workers he represented, but for all those who deserved economic justice."

Moe Biller was born Nov. 15, 1915, in New York City. He graduated with honors from Seward Park High School and attended Brooklyn College and City College of New York. His postal career began in 1937, on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, at what today is called Knickerbocker Station.

In an interview with the *New York Times* in 1980 (after being elected APWU president), he described his first postal job as a substitute clerk, saying that he earned 65 cents an hour and received no vacation benefits or sick pay. And if he wanted to use a bathroom, he said, he had to leave the building.

Except for wartime service in the Army's Adjutant General Corps, during which he served in Europe, Moe continued to be employed with the Post Office and always worked not just at his job, but to improve the lot of those around him.

A unionist from the beginning, he was involved in negotiations in 1938 that resulted in substitute employees earning sick leave and vacation benefits. He subsequently held numerous local positions, including chairman of the Membership Committee, Sergeant-at-Arms, and Executive Vice President.

In 1959, Moe was elected president of the 25,000-member Manhattan-Bronx Postal Workers Union (now called New York Metro APWU). He was still at the helm in 1970 when the Great Postal Strike began with Post Office employees in New York City walking off the job. The strike lasted eight days, with more than 200,000 workers taking part in the nation's 30 largest cities. Before it was over, President Nixon had called in the National Guard in a largely futile attempt to move the mail.

The strike culminated in the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970, in which Congress created the U.S. Postal Service and gave its workers the right to bargain with management over wages, benefits, and working conditions. Moe also served on the committee that brought about the merger in 1971 of the five postal unions that now comprise the APWU.

"He was a man of his times," Burrus said. "He understood the importance of the social movements of his day. Moe was an early supporter of civil rights and a great advocate for women workers – he was a key supporter of POWER [Post Office Women for Equal Rights]. And he was the only union president to speak out in favor of students at Gallaudet University when they demanded a deaf president. All these groups rewarded Moe with great loyalty and affection."

"Moe was a leader of the Great Postal Strike," recalled APWU Vice President Cliff Guffey. "The strike began in his hometown and launched his national reputation as a champion for economic justice."

Moe was never afraid to put his livelihood on the line. In the 1950s, during the anti-communist crusade known as "McCarthyism," Moe was the subject of a thick file built by the FBI. He was among those ordered to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee and was fired from his job at the Post Office. He later was reinstated.



1987 Photo

He risked being fired and arrested in 1970, and a few years after the Great Postal Strike showed his mettle as a staunch supporter of postal workers when they struck the New Jersey Bulk and Foreign Mail Center for four days in 1974, and again, briefly, in 1978.

As recently as 1985, Moe was suspended from his job at the Postal Service, that time for allegedly engaging in unlawful partisan political activity, a violation of the Hatch Act. Two years earlier he had surveyed the APWU membership and announced that the union was endorsing

Walter Mondale's bid for the presidency. Feisty as always, Moe called the action by the Office of Special Counsel "something to intimidate government union leadership and to scare our members."

During the later years of Moe's presidency, he fervently supported APWU campaigns to organize private-sector postal workers. Upon his retirement in 2001, he said that he hoped that this would be his legacy.

Moe was a long-time member of the New York City Central Labor Council, the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO, and the Executive Committee of the Postal, Telegraph and Telephone International (now known as Union Network International).

He also served on the boards of several charitable and civic organizations, including the Muscular Dystrophy Association, United Way International, the National Advisory Council to the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation, and the Federal Executive Committee of the Combined Federal Campaign.

Moe served on the Advisory Board of Cornell University's Trade Union Women's Studies Program and the Advisory Council of Empire State College. He was a member of the Federal Thrift Advisory Council, a member of the Federal Advisory Council on Occupational Safety and Health, and on the National Board of the A. Philip Randolph Institute. He was also a long-time member of the Coalition of Labor Union Women and the NAACP.

Moe's survivors include two sons, Steven and Michael, two daughters-in-law, and two granddaughters.

The September/October issue of *The American Postal Worker* had already been mailed when Moe Biller passed away. The November/December issue will feature a special tribute. If you would like to share a remembrance of Moe, please send it to Sally Davidow, APWU Communications Department, 1300 L St. NW, Washington, DC 20005.