

USPS, Administration Asked to Explain Actions During Nov. 'Ricin' Incident

APWU, Key Congressmen Question Communication

Expressing "deep and serious concerns," APWU President William Burrus has asked the Postal Service to explain its failure to notify the union and employees about an incident in November, when ricin-tainted mail addressed to the White House was handled by USPS.

"I was outraged to learn [through a Feb. 5 article] in the *Washington Post*," Burrus wrote to Postmaster General John E. Potter, "that a mailed item containing poison had been processed through a postal facility; that the facility had not been tested; and that the Union and employees had not been informed." The letter passed through postal facilities in Chattanooga, TN, and Washington, DC, where it was intercepted on Nov. 6.

"No employee has reported ill effects from this incident," Burrus noted, "but if these were to become the Postal Service's procedures for future events, this would be unacceptable to the American Postal Workers Union."

A few weeks after the news broke, the Postal Service provided the APWU with a chronology of events describing its procedures during the November incident. In this report, the USPS claims that "all" postal unions were notified of the incident a few days after it occurred. Burrus described that purported notification as a "blatantly false statement."

"This erroneous entry on the report," he added, "calls into question whether the report is an accurate rendering of events, or merely a retroactive statement made to support the Postal Service's actions."

U.S. Rep. Zach Wamp (R-TN), said on Feb. 27 that he feels there should be an investigation into the failure to tell postal employees in his home district. Wamp said that he was among those who felt that three months is way too long to wait to learn about the interception of a potentially deadly piece of mail.

"I learned of the Chattanooga connection to ricin through the media," the congressman said, "and I do think that some of the complaints about notification for safety and security are justified. We need to have a probe to get to the bottom of it."

Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-CA), the Ranking Minority Member of the House Government Reform Committee, raised some questions of his own regarding last fall's ricin

incident, in a letter to Ralph Basham, the director of the U.S. Secret Service.

Waxman wrote to Basham in mid-February, shortly after the "November-ricin" news accounts broke. Waxman asked specifically about the Secret Service's delay in informing the Postal Service about the discovery of the ricin-contaminated letter addressed to the White House. The news stories said that the USPS was first informed about the letter six days after the contaminant's presence was confirmed.

"A delay in informing the Postal Service about the presence of a potentially deadly toxin such as ricin in the United States mail could expose Postal Service employees as well as Postal Service customers to serious risks, as we saw with the anthrax attacks in 2001," Waxman wrote. "I am writing to learn more about the decision to withhold this information and about any new procedures the Secret Service has put in place to avoid such delays in the future."

Waxman asked for answers to four questions about "how the decision was made not to tell the Postal Service about the ricin, and to understand what procedures are in place to avoid a delay in the future."

The questions concerned why the Secret Service delayed telling the Postal Service; what experts were consulted during the decision-making; and what procedures have been put in place to ensure that needless delays will not occur in the future. Waxman also asked for information — if there is any — about when it was determined that postal workers were not at risk.

The congressman asked the Secret Service to respond by March 2.

Burrus reiterated that he expects to be made aware of USPS emergency policies. "All official contact with the APWU concerning suspected exposure to life-threatening hazardous material must be made to me ... whenever it is known or there is a substantial reason to believe that a substance could cause serious bodily harm or death has entered or passed through a postal facility, the [APWU president] must be notified immediately."

When such an incident occurs, Burrus added, the involved facilities must be tested, and the APWU and employees must be notified of the results of the testing.

Biennial Convention News

State organizations have notified APWU headquarters about their 2004 conventions, which will include discussion of resolutions to be submitted to the 17th Biennial APWU National Convention, set for Aug. 23-27, in Los Angeles.

The majority of the states will hold their gatherings in April, May, and June. The dates for the states' conventions can be reviewed on the Calendar of Events pages at www.apwu.org.

To help local and state conventions in their preparation of resolutions for the biennial convention, the Labor-Man-

agement resolutions from the past three national gatherings have been posted on the APWU Web site.

"We hope to help locals and states avoid submitting resolutions that have been previously approved," said Director of Industrial Relations Greg Bell.

State and local officers working on Labor-Management resolutions can look at previously adopted resolutions on the Industrial Relations pages at www.apwu.org.

The documents also can be obtained by calling or writing to the Industrial Relations Department.

COPA Video in the Mail

President William Burrus has prepared a videotape about the union's Committee on Political Action that is being sent to all state and local presidents, as well as to national officers, and auxiliary and retiree chapters.

The video, which also will be available on disk, offers

members updates on the state of postal reform legislation and the union's COPA fund-raising effort.

The APWU had its most successful COPA campaign ever last year, and the union has launched a drive to raise even more in 2004.

Postal 'Reform' Update

Senate Panel Told: Don't Blame Postal Workers for USPS Woes

The presidents of the nation's four largest postal unions have told lawmakers that they oppose any recommendations made by the President's Commission that would cut workers' pay and benefits.

In a reprise of testimony before a House panel in Chicago in early February, the union leaders Feb. 24 told the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee that they reject the Commission's proposal for the creation of a politically appointed postal regulatory board that would have the power to set wages and determine which services to the public should be continued. They also assailed efforts to make workers' health care and retirement benefits negotiable; to remove postal employees from the existing federal benefits' system; and to change the ground rules for collective bargaining.

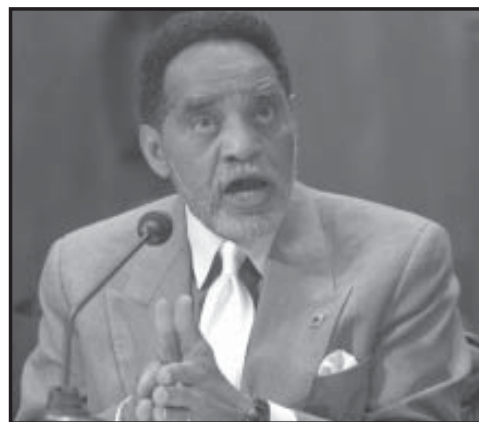
"The Commission's workforce-related proposals are outrageous and totally unacceptable to me and to the workers I represent," APWU President William Burrus told the senators, who will soon draft legislation that could fundamentally change how the Postal Service operates and how it treats its workers and customers.

"The Commission seems to believe that postal workers are fools," Burrus said, adding that the Commission ignored the best interests of small business and individual citizens. "The Commissioners' hearings and private meetings were dominated by large mailers," he said. "It is now up to the members of Congress to examine the public interest."

Rather than slash postal pay and benefits, Burrus told lawmakers, those pondering postal reform should address the root cause of the Postal Service's financial problems: the current system of giving below-cost postage discounts to corporate mailers for presorting their mail. "The Postal Service's own data show that worksharing discounts provided to major mailers exceed the costs avoided by the Postal Service," and result in "hundreds of millions of dollars in lost revenue every year."

Burrus also criticized mailing industry proposals for "bottom-up" pricing. "This radical concept, which purports to establish a system whereby mailers pay only for the services they use, would actually relieve the largest mailers of any responsibility for the costs of maintaining a universal system," he said.

The APWU president also used his appearance before the Senate panel to denounce the Postal Service and the Administration for failing to notify the union and employees that the deadly poison ricin had been found in a letter sent to the White House (see story at left). The letter had trav-



President Burrus testifies before the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee.

eled through USPS facilities in Chattanooga, TN, and Washington, DC, but workers were victims of what Burrus called "an unfair double standard."

"Senate office buildings are vacated and tested for a period as long as it takes, while postal employees are not even informed that they have been exposed. ... Postal workers will not be treated like the canaries of the mining industry in years gone by." Burrus also faulted the Bush Administration for eliminating the Department of Homeland Security's funding for building decontamination research. "No warning and no clean up. This is unacceptable."

Burrus, joined by the presidents of the National Association of Letter Carriers, the National Postal Mail Handlers Union, and the National Rural Letter Carriers Association, told the senators that the APWU supports some reform proposals. "We promise to join those who seek positive change," Burrus said, saying that he supports measures that would ensure long-term viability, such as allowing the USPS to retain earnings and giving it the flexibility to adjust rates in response to rising fuel costs or other short-term economic inhibitors.

In a significant departure from the Bush Administration's general support for the Commission's recommendations, Office of Personnel Management Deputy Director Dan Blair rejected a plan that the unions, the mailing industry, and the rest of the postal community supports: Transferring back to the Treasury the \$27 billion obligation to fund the portion of postal workers' Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) retirement that they earned while serving in the military.

Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME), the committee's chairperson, said she differs with the Administration position on that issue. She noted that the Treasury currently funds the military portion of CSRS benefits for other federal agencies, and said that the Postal Service should be treated no differently.

OPM's Blair also expressed his agency's concern that the Commission proposal to make pension and retiree healthcare benefits negotiable could destabilize the benefit programs relied on by all other federal workers.

The OPM official said that no large group of employees had ever been "severed" from these programs, and that such a move could have unintended consequences. OPM was studying these issues, he added, and would provide a full report to the committee at a future date.

What's Up Next on The Hill

Additional hearings are scheduled, as key congressional committees consider proposals for postal "reform" legislation.

The Senate Governmental Affairs Committee will hold hearings March 9 and 11, which will focus on "Sustaining the Nine Million Jobs in the \$900 Billion Mailing Industry." A rare joint hearing before the House and Senate postal committees has been slated for March 23.

At press time, it is unclear who will be invited to testify at these sessions.

COLA UPDATE

An increase in the Consumer Price Index in January means that after the sixth and final month of the fifth Cost-Of-Living Adjustment period under the National Agreement, employees have accrued an annual raise of \$208.

The adjustment amounts to a 10 cents per hour increase, which works out to \$8 per pay period. The fifth COLA will be effective March 6, and will be reflected in March 26, 2004 paychecks (pay period 07-2004).

Updated pay scales can be found in the March/April edition of *The American Postal Worker*.

Pay scales also can be seen at www.apwu.org.

There were two COLA increases in 2003 (\$291, effective Sept. 6; and \$250, March 8). The only COLA increase the previous year was a \$312 adjustment on Sept. 7, 2002.

Postal Press Presents New Look Online

To better provide assistance to union communicators, the APWU National Postal Press Association has redesigned its Web site.

The site features articles from among the PPA's 300 member publications and links to other sites useful to newsletter editors, publicity directors, Web-site content providers — any APWU representatives who hope to better communicate with the union membership.

There also is a new "Members Only" section that provides downloadable graphics, resources for editorials and cartoons, and reference material on regulatory issues (e.g., libel, copyright, union and federal elections). The PPA's new Web address is www.apwupostalpress.org.

The APWU Web site, www.apwu.org, meanwhile, is undergoing significant renovations. The new site will be launched early this summer.