

APWU History

The American Postal Workers Union, AFL-CIO, represents more than 220,000 employees of the U.S. Postal Service who are clerks, maintenance employees, and motor vehicle service workers. The APWU is the world's largest postal union.

Postal unions, dating back to the 19th Century, have experienced a number of transitions, paralleling the growth of the former Post Office Department, which became the U.S. Postal Service in 1970. Upon the creation of the USPS, postal unions were allowed to bargain collectively over wages and conditions for the first time.

The early unions had essentially no bargaining rights — they existed largely as lobbying organizations that otherwise would have had no say about their working conditions. Wage increases depended on the whim of Congress.

As a result, postal workers were chronically underpaid. In March 1970, full-time employees earned about \$6,200 to start, and workers with 21 years of service averaged only \$8,440 — barely enough to make ends meet at that time. In fact, many postal workers qualified for food stamps.

The sporadic raises they did receive never seemed to amount to much, particularly in high-cost urban areas. From 1967 to 1969, postal wages were not increased at all, although Congress did raise its own pay 41 percent during that time. In 1968, the Kappel Commission, a special panel that had been studying postal reform during President Johnson's administration, concluded that postal workers deserved the same collective bargaining rights afforded to private-sector workers under the National Labor Relations Act. Congress failed to act on the commission's recommendation.

The Great Postal Strike of 1970

Workers grew increasingly frustrated with Congress's inaction, and on March 18, 1970, thousands of New York City postal workers walked off the job in protest. Within days, they were joined by 200,000 others in 30 major cities. Mail service ground to a halt and the plight of postal workers was brought to the public's attention. The strike was soon settled, with Congress approving a 6 percent wage increase, retroactive to the previous December.

The strike served as an impetus for the enactment of the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970, which granted unions the right to negotiate with management over their wages, benefits and working conditions. In lieu of the right to strike, a binding arbitration process was established for resolving contract disputes. The law granted postal workers an additional 8 percent raise and enabled them to advance more quickly to higher-paying positions.

In the first contract, a starting postal worker's salary was raised to \$8,488: slightly more than a 21-year veteran of the Post Office Department had been getting just three years earlier.

