

Postal unions may defy Reagan

The administration has declared war on cost-of-living protections -- and postal workers see themselves as frontline troops.

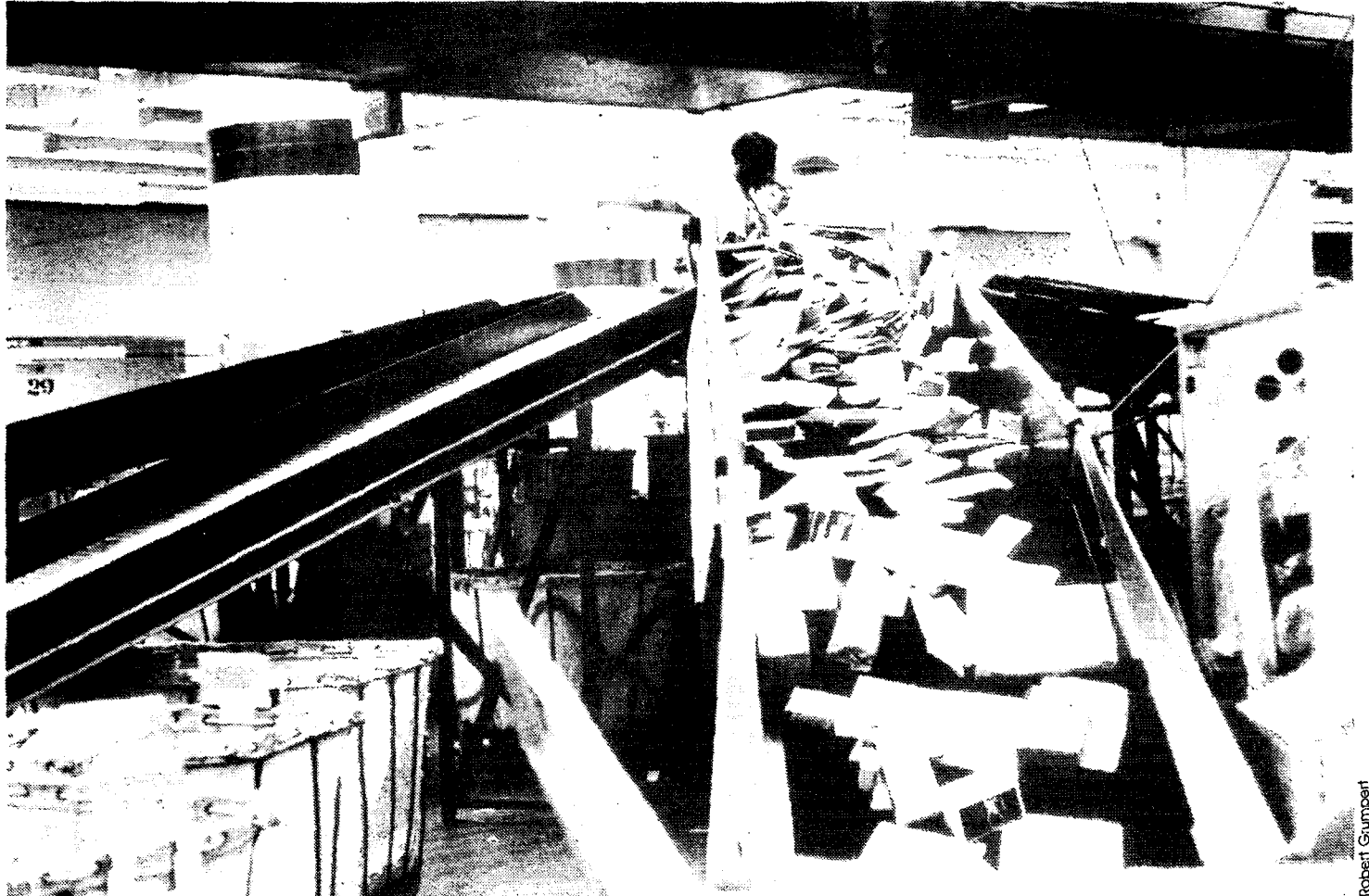
By David Moberg

AS THE SPIRIT OF REAGANISM sweeps through government, public employees are bracing themselves for desperate battles to keep their jobs and protect their incomes. "I think we're the front-line troops," says John Leyden, executive director of the AFL-CIO Public Employee Department, "and I think they're trying to decimate our ranks."

In the first big confrontation with public employees, the Reagan administration came out a winner by negotiating a last-minute contract with the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization that was in line with the government's original offer. But the PATCO executive board urged members to "overwhelmingly reject" the June 22 settlement. When told of the board's unanimous action, a meeting of 500 local union leaders cheered and chanted "strike, strike, strike."

Now it seems likely that members will reject the contract that granted an 11 percent annual wage increase -- far less than the union demanded -- and both extended the contract to three and a half years and failed to include any move toward a shorter work week as a means of relieving job stress.

If they do, PATCO will face an intransigent Secretary of Transportation Drew Lewis, who has said that no con-



Mail sorting at a post office annex in Los Angeles

tract for the controllers offer will exceed the present \$40 million total. So air controllers could be going out on strike toward the end of July, just as the postal contracts expire on July 20.

Though leaders of the two unions that represent 500,000 of the 600,000 postal workers under contract -- Morris "Moe" Biller of the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) and Vincent Sombrotto of the National Association of Letter Carriers -- have both toned down their rhetoric in recent months, their earlier warnings of a strike are still valid. Serious issues divide the Postal Service under Postmaster General William Bolger, and both the unions and actions by Bolger, the Postal Rate Commission and the

White House have intensified the pressure.

In 1978 there were wildcat strikes in several locations, and later the contract was rejected by members before being sent to a mediator for final settlement. Wildcats are less likely this year. Dismissal of 226 strikers in 1978 has had a chilling effect. (One emotional demand from the unions, personally endorsed by Biller, is amnesty for the 102 who have still not been reinstated, but chances for winning this issue are slim.) But, more important, members of the two big unions appear to have greater confidence in their leaders, both of whom were once militant local leaders in the New York area, and in a bargaining process that in-

volves members and local officials more than last time.

If there is a strike, it is likely that it will be called by the national unions, which have been preparing contingency plans and called local officials to a July 14 meeting to discuss plans for a possible illegal strike. "I don't think people want to do anything unless there's unified action," one former wildcat leader now in national office said.

If their leaders say a strike is necessary, most local officials think the response will be solid, despite hesitations in some quarters. "There won't be any problem getting everybody out," Tommy Briscoe, president of the 4,900-member

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The new technology will only ring once

By Paul D. Roose

OAKLAND, CA

IT IS 1985. IN A DALLAS SHOPPING center, a busy customer walks up to a bank of keyboards under a U.S. Postal Service logo. He inserts two quarters and types a 100-word letter to his mother in Indianapolis. The signals are converted to electronic pulses and transmitted to Indiana by way of a COMSAT satellite. In the Indianapolis post office the message is received and automatically printed on paper that is then automatically stuffed in an envelope. A letter carrier delivers it to Mom the next day.

Inside the postal system, however, this vision of the future looks less than marvelous. For the mail collector in Dallas, there is less work now that department stores and business that used to mail trays of bills every week instead send computer tapes with billing information to the main post office via private courier. Also, more people use the keyboard terminals for letters, cutting down on work so that his or her route may be abolished or combined with another, forcing the collector into a less desirable job.

At the Dallas post office, the substitute letter-sorting machine operator sees both hours and job security diminish as the mail is replaced by computer tapes. In Indianapolis, the letter carrier still has



Privacy, public control and jobs are on the line in the switch to electronic mail.

a job delivering "hard copy," but he or she spends less time using the knowledge of the route for office sorting; greater pre-sorting means that the carrier has become much more of an on-the-street "packhorse."

Next January the U.S. Postal Service will initiate Electronic Computer-Originated Mail, known as E-COM. Though public keyboards for individual messages will be dramatically visible, at first big business will benefit most by delivering large computerized mailings to the post office that will then be transmitted electronically, converted to "hard copy" at receiving post offices and delivered by letter carriers.

There are three levels or "generations" of technological sophistication to Electronic Message Systems, or EMS. In Generation I, mailers can hand-deliver computer tapes or paper messages (which are converted to electronic signals by scanners in the post office) that the post office

will deliver electronically and automatically print, place in an envelope and deliver as letters at the receiving end. With Generation II, mailers electronically transmit their messages to post office computers. A big company, such as Exxon, could put its monthly billing information on tapes and transmit it to the post office, which would electronically sort and deliver the bills to customers in a day or two at a cost per unit ranging from 9 to 55 cents.

With Generation III, there will be no "hard copy." Messages sent electronically will be received on individual business and home terminals. Such technology is already used by some big corporations for intra-company messages. Direct bank transfers of federal checks are another current example of Generation III technology.

Cui bono?

There is no question about the capacity and availability of this electronic message technology. But there are serious social questions. Who will control EMS? Can privacy in communications be protected? How much should the Postal Service and federal government be involved? What will happen to postal workers' jobs, both in numbers and in the quality of work?

As late as 1976 Postmaster General Benjamin Bailar called EMS a "practical and financial impossibility." But faced

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Vive la difference

"In Short" stringer Dave Lindorff reports that capitalists from abroad are hauling their assets to the U.S. at a growing rate. The Socialist victory in France, he says, has sent money pouring out of that country. According to a New York diamond dealer, the dominant language in the city's diamond markets shifted abruptly from English to French as French moneybags, seeking ways to hide their assets from an expected wealth tax, began buying investment-grade stones. One woman at Citibank says she saw a Frenchman come in with two suitcases full of cold cash in francs.

Others report that the British upper crust sees the handwriting of a resurgent left in Britain on the wall and has already begun shifting its money out of the country into real estate and tangible property in the U.S.

"They're expecting a freeze on transfer of capital out of the country when the left comes in, and then a tax on wealth," says one dealer who's getting some of the business, "so they're getting it out while they can." Of course, notes Lindorff, the loss of this capital will further hamper investment in Britain, thus helping to seal Thatcher's and the Conservatives' fate.

New York art dealers report that rich Italians are buying big in the U.S. in an effort to get money out of their country—despite the weakness of the lira against the dollar. And there are signs that the ruling classes in Latin America are feeling less than secure: Bañons and landowners in such places as Brazil, Argentina, Colombia and Central America have been sending their cash up north for real estate and smaller valuables that can easily be hidden and moved around.

Cause for alarms

Half of the country's nuclear power plants missed a July 1 deadline for installation of emergency alarms to alert the surrounding population to a serious accident. But the problem goes deeper. As Westchester county executive Alfred DelBello remarked when New York State failed to present an adequate overall emergency plan by an earlier deadline, "The public should not be deceived into thinking that when the sirens go off there's a plan behind it." Rep. Toby Moffett (D-Conn.), who chairs the House Environment, Energy and Natural Resources subcommittee, sent a letter to the chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission alleging "little convincing NRC enforcement action" on the emergency planning deadlines. In explaining the delay on installing alarms, one utility spokesman claimed that many utilities had placed orders with the same alarm manufacturer at about the same time—which, at least in some cases, was apparently less than a month before the deadline. "It seems," Joan Holt of the New York Public Interest Research Group told "In Short," "that the NRC is sending a message to the utilities that it's not going to enforce the regulations seriously."

U.S. is true to formula

Fred Clarkson of the Infant Formula Action Coalition (INFAC) reports that the infant formula problem, thought by many to be limited to the Third World ("In Short," June 3), is also a serious health issue in this country. Public Advocates, a San Francisco-based public-interest law firm, testified recently to a congressional subcommittee that there are "at least 5,000 infant deaths per year attributable to infant formula misuse and bottle feeding among low-income families in the U.S." Public Advocates also cited certain diseases that occur at a much higher rate among bottle-fed babies than among those fed from the breast. All those conditions take their acutest form in low-income areas, where over- or under-dilution of formula—often with unclean water—can result in severe diarrhea, vomiting, kidney disease, malnutrition or gastroenteritis.

And despite a trend back to breast feeding among upper-income groups, according to the testimony, the poor are bottle feeding their babies in the vast majority of cases. Taking figures from 1979, for example, 90 percent of the mothers who delivered in private hospitals breast fed, while less than 5 percent of the mothers in public hospitals did the same. Poor mothers receive little, if any, prenatal counseling on infant feeding, so their decisions on the issue are likely to be influenced by the free samples of formula and industry-produced "educational" materials that understaffed public hospitals often distribute. But there's no cause for worry, according to State Department spokesperson Eleanor Constable, who has said that the World Health Organization's "Code for the Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes"—against which Reagan's emissaries cast the lone "no" vote—is "largely irrelevant to the U.S., a country where there is an educated populace, where there is safe drinking water and where there is extensive health care."

—Josh Kornbluth



Some 1,500 lesbians, gay men and their supporters marched through downtown Seattle on June 27, calling for gay rights and protesting against right-wing policies and attitudes. Endorsed by more than 50 organizations, Seattle's "1981 Lesbian/Gay Freedom March" marked the 12th anniversary of a riot against police harassment at the Stonewall Inn in New York City, an incident that helped spark the modern gay liberation movement.

Out, out, damn corporate spot

Will we still call it "public" broadcasting in 1984? Just barely, if the latest actions in Washington are any guide.

If success were the criterion, public broadcasting would be rolling in funding. Public radio listeners are at an all-time high, and the latest audience figures show that nearly three-quarters of all American homes watched public TV in March. But public broadcasting bucks the Stockman position that government should have no part of broadcasting (*In These Times*, April 29 and May 13).

Congress appears to be backing Stockman up, if not enthusiastically. In June some of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's advance funding—for 1983—was rescinded. This money had been allocated in advance to protect the system from political retribution, and with rescission the principle appears lost. As for CPB's 1984-1986 authorization, it was attached to the budget in the Senate, which made it nearly impossible to mobilize protest over the low level of funding.

The House has passed an appropriations bill whose amendments are perhaps more important in the long run than the dollar figures in the main body of the bill. One of them approves an 18-month trial run of commercials up to four minutes an hour on 10 public TV stations and 10 public radio stations.

Some claim that commercials have already arrived. Two months ago a new FCC ruling went into effect that allows stations to display corporate logos of underwriters. Now PBS has set up guidelines allowing those logos to be animated, accompanied by identifying audio and names of single products.

Public interest groups—including the Committee to Save KQED (San Francisco), the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers and four others—filed a petition with the FCC to reconsider that ruling. So did the National Association of Broadcasters, which wants to keep public TV out of competition for its advertisers. Both groups ask a good question: What is the difference, with the new logo guidelines, between identification and promotion? They may not get an answer from the new head of the FCC, Mark Fowler, who has been happily announcing the era of "un-regulation" to anyone who will listen since his appointment was approved.

Raising ad revenue on the air and also in *The Dial* (a program guide that was recently extended to four more cities) is one of several commercial gambits that some public TV stations are expanding (*In These Times*, Dec. 17, 1980). "PBS/Cable," the latest version of PBS' pay TV plan, would link up with art institutions like theaters, museums and symphonies to produce cultural programs for a monthly cable fee. Boosting revenue this year is the rental of publicly-funded hardware for commercial purposes.

The money crunch has driven deeper wedges between groups in the public broadcasting "community." One of the most marked divisions became public at the June annual membership meeting of PBS stations in Cincinnati, where the biggest public TV stations (New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston and sometimes San Francisco, Detroit and Miami) chafed at the one-station, one-vote rule that lumped them with the smaller stations.

The big stations, as Chicago station president William McCarter openly acknowledged at an April board of directors meeting, look upon shrinking federal subsidy as an opportunity to expand their for-profit operations. Smaller stations, dependent both on federal dollars and on the bigger stations' programming, can only suffer from cutbacks. "We are an almost entirely different business than they are," said KCET (Los Angeles) president Jim Loper, an impatient member of the unraveling broadcasting "system."

—Pat Aufderheide

Suit challenges anti-alien policy

LOS ANGELES—The ability of thousands of undocumented workers to obtain health care is now being threatened by a Los Angeles policy that is itself the subject of a nationally significant lawsuit.

In March, a newly elected, politically conservative Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted to require anyone unable to pay for county health care to sign up for Medi-Cal (California's medical assistance program) before receiving treatment—except in cases of emergency or contagious disease. A coalition of health care workers, labor unions, community organizations and religious groups is fighting the supervisors' decision in California Superior Court because it feels the policy will keep thousands of undocumented work-

ers from receiving health care.

Illegal aliens will not apply for Medi-Cal, the coalition charges, because such applications are routinely processed through the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service as part of that agency's efforts to find and deport them. The new policy would be unfair, the group says, because undocumented aliens pay for more than their share of social services through taxes on income, sales and gasoline. (Mexican sociologist Jorge Bustamante has suggested that the proper term for Mexican immigrants in the U.S. should be "undocumented taxpayer.")

The Los Angeles supervisors claim the change is a necessary measure to cut costs in a health care system facing deterioration as a result of impending federal and state cuts in health care funds that support county services.

The county is currently under a restraining order prohibiting it from implementing the new policy pending the outcome of the lawsuit. The lawsuit charges that the new policy is illegal because it violates state statutes that require counties to take care of indigents.

Though almost all states require counties and other local governments to provide health care for indigent residents, according to Geraldine Dallek of the National Health Law Program, the Los Angeles case represents the first time an attempt has been made to establish the right of undocumented aliens to receive care under such statutes.

The Board of Supervisors' decision is one of the most hotly debated issues in Los Angeles this year. Even the Los Angeles County Grand Jury, in an unusual step, urged the Board of Supervisors to rescind their decision and, instead, step up efforts to obtain more federal aid for the health care of undocumented aliens.

Yet this approach, say health care specialists, is likely to fail—particularly in light of overall health care cuts already proposed by the Reagan administration. The National Association of Community Health Centers, for instance, estimates that almost half of the nation's community and migrant health centers will be forced to close if Reagan administration proposals pass.

Dr. Shirley Fanin, chief of communicable diseases for Los Angeles, said that in some respects Los Angeles is acquiring the health profile of a developing rather than a developed country. She said the problem will grow worse if the new policy adopted by the Board of Supervisors is implemented.

—Bill Kenkelen