

Postal workers, customers testify before Workers' Rights Board

After listening to testimony from postal customers and workers about deteriorating service and substandard working conditions at the U.S. Postal Service, a Portland Workers' Rights Board recommended that USPS hire more letter carriers and clerks to help alleviate the problem.

The Workers' Rights Board is a project of Portland Jobs with Justice, a coalition of 90 organizations working for workers' rights. The board is drawn from a wide spectrum of community leaders willing to intervene when workers' rights are threatened.

Oregon state Sen. Chip Shields (D-Portland) chaired the public hearing Feb. 21 at Augustana Lutheran Church in Northeast Portland. More than 100 people attended, with 20 people offering testimony.

Joining Shields on the panel were United Methodist Pastor John Schwiebert; Geri Washington, a Multnomah Education Service District director; Don Oman, owner of Casa Bruno; Jon Bartholomew of OSPiRG; and Bill Bigelow of Rethinking Schools.

Workers testified of chronic mandatory overtime, late, irregular delivery, and pressure to work with injuries, while at the same time "transitional employees" revealed how they have worked under one-year contracts with no benefits for as long as four years.

Anil Nath has worked as a transitional employee (the equivalent of a temp) for three-and-a-half years. "I've worked very hard in very extreme conditions of weather, and I've been bounced around like a ping-pong from station to station."

He told the panel that while he was away from work to get treatment for a work-related injury, the Postal Service tried to fire him. "Thank goodness that I do have one benefit: I belonged to the union and they got my job back in days," he said.

Other transitional employees said they were afraid to take time off for fear of being fired or not having their contracts renewed.



ABOVE) Gloria McMurtry, a small business owner in Northeast Portland, testifies before a Workers Rights Board about the importance of having regular six-day a week delivery with the same carrier. (BELOW) Karen Staats, a member of Letter Carriers Branch 82, shows injuries she has incurred while delivering the mail. Staats told the panel that she felt pressured to return to work before she had fully healed from torn ligaments and a fractured ankle. She reinjured her ankle hurrying to finish her route and will live with permanent pain and swelling for the rest of her life. "You'd be surprised how much a foot impacts the rest of your body," she said.



Ken Wilson, a 26-year letter carrier, said for most of his career he has been able to balance job and family responsibilities without too much problem. That has changed the last couple of years.

A former Little League manager, he had to give that up because he couldn't always make practices or be on time for games. He said he's seldom home early enough to help his son with homework.

"I want to be there for them (family), but the Post Office is keeping me away from them with all of the mandatory overtime and working my day off because they won't hire enough people to do the job right."

Window clerk Patty Olsen, a member of American Postal Workers Union Local 128, said long lines, shorter hours, and closures have impacted everyone. She said under the USPS plan, 2,000 stations are earmarked for closure nationwide over the next few years, with rumors circulating locally that Creston and University stations are on the chopping block.

"Customers are unhappy, and workers are frustrated," Olsen said.

Postal workers said it only makes sense to hire more employees working regular 40-hour workweeks with no forced overtime. "It's easy to work harder and be more productive when you know you'll have time to recover and heal," one worker said.

But USPS management says the hiring freeze is necessary to cut labor costs because of declining revenue. The Postmaster General is further advocating cutting one or two days of delivery per week.

National Association of Letter Carriers Branch 82 Secretary-Treasurer Kevin Card reminded the Workers' Rights Board that USPS is a self-supporting government agency that doesn't use any taxpayer dollars to operate.

"Anyone saying the USPS is looking for a bailout is flat-out lying," he said.

USPS reportedly lost \$8 billion last year, but most of that loss — \$5.5 billion — was due to a burdensome retiree health care prefunding schedule man-

dated by Congress in 2006.

"No other government agency has to do this. No private company is required to do this," Card said.

Card said the fund currently has enough money (\$40 billion) to cover all retiree health care needs for the next 20 years. Additionally, the Office of the Inspector General has reported that postal employee retirement accounts are overfunded by more than \$50 billion.

"If Congress eliminates the mandate, we can keep your local post office open and continue to deliver six days a week ... refund the overpayment of ratepayer funds in our retirement accounts, and hire the unemployed," Card said.

After listening to testimony and asking questions, the Workers' Rights Board adjourned briefly before issuing its report, which included a pledge to request a meeting with USPS management to recommend it restore customer service and improve working conditions by fully staffing postal facilities.

The panel also pledged to communicate with Portland's Congressional delegation and President Obama their desire to see a swift fix to the USPS accounting problems.

"The issues facing the public Postal Service are of deep concern to all community members," Sen. Shields said. "I found particularly troubling certain management practices, especially with regard to understaffing and transitional employees, but I also came away with a sense of hope because of some great ideas for the future."

Teacher and Rethinking Schools editor Bill Bigelow said, "I learned something new here tonight. I didn't know this, and I feel that I'm a pretty informed person. I would like more people to hear what we've heard tonight."

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