

POSTAL NEWS

No. 162/2009

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1. The Times Are a-Changin' for Postal Service

By Ed O'Keefe

Friday, October 9, 2009

The U.S. Postal Service lost billions of dollars in revenue during the last fiscal year as the volume of mail plunged. Lawmakers may one day soon consider cutting mail delivery to five days a week. They also may need to sort out how the Postal Service pays for the benefits of current and future retirees.

But most customers only care about one thing: The fate of their neighborhood post office.

On Friday the Postal Service must turn over an updated list to the Postal Regulatory Commission of sites still being considered for closure or consolidation.

Despite the concern and confusion generated by the drawn-out process, Postmaster General John E. Potter believes customers should extend their concern.

"This is part of the problem when it comes to discussing the Postal Service," he told a lunchtime crowd at the National Press Club in Washington. "Because here we are talking about a \$5 billion ongoing deficit and we're all wrapped up in an issue that's probably worth on the order of \$20 million to \$100 million at best."

Closures account for a small piece of Potter's grand plans to remake the U.S. mail system. He's advocated for reducing mail delivery to five days, for a smaller workforce and a greener fleet of vehicles -- and maybe, just maybe, the chance to sell something other than stamps.

"Given the changing use of the mail by the American public -- we're not faulting anyone -- and given what's going on with the economy, we need more flexibility to manage this place so that we can get into the black," Potter said.

He's not involved in the details of possible closures, but Potter said it's unlikely any facility will close before January. He's delegated the other dirty details to district managers and other Washington-based officials.

"Our folks have reached out to communities and will continue to do that, but keep in mind that we're facing a significant gap going forward of \$5 billion. So people cannot expect business as usual and that we will be able to fund everything that we currently do," he said.

Potter wants Americans to start talking about how the Postal Service will exist into the next decade and beyond. He wants a national conversation among lawmakers, the mailing industry, consumers and everyone else. Americans will have to consider mail volume, the frequency of delivery and the cost, he said.

The Postal Service operates more retail outlets than Starbucks, Wal-Mart and McDonald's combined, Potter said.

"And we can only sell stamps," he lamented. "I think we're going to have to rationalize. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that we're not going to sell the same number of stamps going forward."

So if Congress told him next week that he could try selling just one service or product, what would it be?

"I'd be a bank," he said, but later admitted that "that's not going to happen."

Why not?

"Politics," he said.

Fumbling on Fingerprints

The Census Bureau hired more than 162,000 temporary workers this year to work on preparations for the 2010 decennial census. The agency had to fingerprint each worker for a mandatory FBI criminal background check. But the Census Bureau failed to get readable prints for at least a fifth of those temporary hires, according to a Government Accountability report released this week.

Poorly trained Census employees improperly printed their temporary colleagues and the FBI advised the agency to conduct background checks based solely on an applicant's name, the report said.

"It is possible that more than 200 people with unclassifiable prints had disqualifying criminal records but still worked, and had contact with the public during address canvassing," the GAO estimated.

Workers who do address canvassing go street-by-street to make sure that addresses do indeed exist.

Of the temporary hires that did get printed, approximately 1 percent had criminal records, the GAO said. Of those, 750 were fired, because they had committed more serious crimes such as rape, manslaughter and child abuse.

The Census Bureau said it will retrain employees to address the GAO's concerns.

It has been working on its fingerprint background checks, spokesman Stephen Buckner said. When asked, Buckner was unaware of any incidences of criminal activity committed by the temporary employees. This was the first time the Census Bureau has fingerprinted its temporary workers.

What of the DCIPS?

Your (substitute) Diarist received several anxious queries from readers regarding the fate of the Defense Civilian Intelligence Personnel System, the pay-for-performance system used by some defense and intelligence personnel. Concerned readers wanted to know if their version of the National Security Personnel System also got repealed in the compromise version of the Defense Department authorization bill announced Wednesday.

Turns out the compromise suspends DCIPS for one year pending a congressional review. This means current employees stay in the system, but nobody else can transition into it. The National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, which has used DCIPS longer than any other agency, is exempt from the suspension.

Joe Davidson is away. He will resume writing this column when he returns. Direct your Diary-themed tips, queries, rants and concerns to federaldiary@washpost.com. Read Ed O'Keefe's blog, the Federal Eye, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/federaleyeye>.

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09:23 October 8th, 2009

2. How's the postal service in your area?

Post a comment (10)

Posted by: Stephen Addison

Tags: UK News, postal service, postmen, royal mail

After weeks of regional disruption, a national postal strike now looms.

The Communication Workers Union accuses managers of bullying and harassment in the drive for modernisation. Managers accuse the workers of being obstructive and bloody-minded.

Meanwhile nimbler competitors, who do not have to provide the one-price-goes-anywhere service, make gains and big clients like the Internet shopping services withdraw their custom.

What's the postal service like in your area? Do you think the union has a good case for a strike?

10 comments so far :

October 8th, 2009

10:46 am GMT

No sympathy at all here I am afraid. The Royal Mail and post Office is an utter joke to be honest - mail can be slow to arrive, even on 1st class but the worst, by far, is the parcel delivery. I ran a small enterprise in end-of-life laptop spares in my spare time and leared the hard way: You want it delivering, it HAS to be signed for. 100% of items sent RM 1st Class Recorded arrived, all within 2 days. Those sent non-recorded were a pathetic 93%. Ok, some may be people 'trying it on', but most were regular business contacts who simply wanted a part from us and it wasn't worth their while to mess about for £20-£100 anyway.

Most of the Union firebrands seem to forget the fate of the pits 30 years ago. THAT was another industry that was forever on strike, refused to modernise and slim-down in the face of new technology and new mediums. Why would anyone wish to stand in a Post Office queue? Those of us who have a choice simply don't in.

- Posted by Adam K

October 8th, 2009

1:57 pm GMT

Public utilities such as energy, water, railways the post office in fact any service on which the public depends for their daily existence should not be simply left to the vagaries of market forces and private enterprise , indeed a good case could be put forward at this time to include banking within the aforementioned criteria.

Sacrificing a small amount of GDP to support a viable and sustainable transport, energy and communications structure is vital to a nations overall prosperity and continental governments aknowledged this fact decades ago.

Privatization of utility companies does not work and leads only to "cherry picking" of the most profitable sectors of each business entity resulting in a stratified organisation incapable of raising the necessary finance to renew or upgrade infrastructure and therefore provide a satisfactory and reliable overall level of service, unfortunately we all pay for this mistake through higher charges and a general decline in standards.

- Posted by letstrytheotherway

October 8th, 2009

2:24 pm GMT

The post office is being destroyed by a cynical management intent on earning its bonuses no matter what.

Mail turning up at midday and post office closures are trumpeted as "improvements" and used to justify the millions paid to them.

The underlying problem driving all this is the obsession with creating "free markets" for competitors to cherry pick.

It was a perfectly alright well liked institution before all that started.

- Posted by Robbie

October 8th, 2009

6:43 pm GMT

The service has been lousy for years, unless you think that receiving your first post at 11 a.m. is satisfactory. No wonder they abolished the distinction between first and

second class - it was to disguise the fact that first class didn't exist. Why can't they deliver the post in the early morning like generations of postmen before them?

- Posted by Matthew

October 8th, 2009

10:09 pm GMT

i feel that the strike is a good idea, our postmen and women work really hard and are always on the go, some of them work from 6am-6pm and all they get is people moaning and no appreciation! from topcats and citizens! so some parcels are delayed but postmen and women are not magic and cannot predict traffic or accidents! special delivery is there for people that need mail delivered urgently next day so royal mail are not fully to blame! 1st and 2nd class have never been a guaranteed service of when the item will arrive! also the post office is not involved in the strike and therefore should not be tarnished with the same brush! and as for post office queues...everybody needs serving and the counter clerks only have one pair of hands!!

- Posted by *****

October 9th, 2009

1:02 am GMT

Quote

"The service has been lousy for years, unless you think that receiving your first post at 11 a.m. is satisfactory. No wonder they abolished the distinction between first and second class - it was to disguise the fact that first class didn't exist. Why can't they deliver the post in the early morning like generations of postmen before them?"

This is the reason posties are fighting, the management have cutback and cutback (while they get their big bonuses) so the service has got worse and worse. If Post office closures are announced, every body in the towns affected are up in arms. If Royal mail management carry on there will be nothing left worth fighting for and then believe me it will cost more than 30p to send a letter from Land's End - John o'Groats.

Like any business, cutbacks mean a worse service as you will know if you have ever phoned an overseas call centre.

- Posted by David

October 9th, 2009

11:09 am GMT

The sooner they privatize the so called royal mail the better, they should lose the royal stamp they don't deserve it. The amount of wrong delivered letters I get is worrying, I am always having to redeliver them in person, I am doing their job for them a private company should be included why should they have the monopoly.

- Posted by margaret marsh

October 9th, 2009

12:40 pm GMT

There are already multiple examples of privatized utility companies and they patently do not work for the benefit of their customers, as maximizing board-member and shareholder return is their one and only intent.

You will in due course find energy bills for example increasing by 30 to 40% simply because none of the huge profits made by these private corporations over the past

decade or more has been used to renew and upgrade now obsolete equipment and distribution infrastructure.

It will also be the same story for water, railways and telecommunications, in fact we have already been primed by the current government that a levy will be applied to all landlines to pay for upgrading the internet to provide suitable coverage to “outlying” areas of the country!

I have nothing against “free markets” and legitimate competition, however I strongly object to allowing idiots and scam merchants to keep the profits generated by these now private companies and pass to me either directly or indirectly their liabilities, this is just an absurdity.

- Posted by dumbbeddownspin

October 9th, 2009

12:57 pm GMT

It is the main sorting offices where the biggest labour problems exist - workers demanding feather-bedding and job security on completely unrealistic terms. They seem to think we are still in the 1950's or '60's. Sad that they are so appallingly badly led - and like the coalminers under Scargill they are heading towards oblivion whilst the rest of us will quietly move on with a better, faster, more technologically advanced system (and probably with all our local posties) and where a few militants in the main centres can no longer make life a misery for the rest of us.

- Posted by Iain Laird

October 9th, 2009

1:36 pm GMT

Your reading and understanding of recent social history with particular reference to Mr Scargill and the demise of the coal industry in this country seems to be incorrect. It was the importation of cheap subsidised coal from abroad that led the coal-miners and their livelihoods into oblivion and not as you state any leadership skills or the lack thereof on the part of Mr Scargill.

You seem also to be rather naive with regard to the ultimate consequences of privatizations, takeovers and mergers in that my experience would suggest the existing employees of the entity which has been acquired are usually fired, made redundant or allowed to disappear by natural wastage and are then replaced by the acquirers employees whilst a select few are offered and accept new employment contracts on reduced terms and conditions.

You really should question what you are being told more frequently and arrive at your own decision...don't believe the spin!

- Posted by dumbbeddownspin

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