

Just how Broken does the system have to be before we really work at fixing it

By John Amtsfeld, January 20, 2008

Sometime ago while discussing the disposition of a grievance, the management representative in complete exasperation told me that his district people, the then Regional people and Headquarters as well as the NRLCA National Office disagreed with the position I was taking; that most ordinary people and legal professionals would find my position totally insupportable and How could I continue to believe that I was the only one that was right. I thought for a moment and then I told the management representative that he could line up people from here to the Mississippi River and back to tell me that I was wrong and it would not make a difference; because I was absolutely sure that I was right. I ended up winning that grievance. On four separate occasions, I had Headquarters personally intervene in grievances I originated either because I had resolved a grievance at a lower level that they refused to implement or because they intervened to prevent resolution of the grievance all of which the initial position that I took was eventually sustained. On six separate occasions, positions that I took established national precedent.

I do not recount this history to toot my own horn; but to illustrate that it is possible to triumph over heavy or even impossible odds if you truly believe and have the persistence to keep trying.

Over the course of the past several months, I have had responses to various articles, commentaries and editorials I have written which while varying in terms of what is being addressed are basically the same theme. Those comments are as follows:

- I am a carrier in a local office and I believe we need change on every level, primarily the state level in New Jersey but also the National level. What can I do to force the kinds of change we need in how the Union is structured and how to make the union responsive to members, let alone improve representation.
- I have been going to state and national conventions for years and years and the same people come and the same things just keep happening over and over again. I fell like I am banging my head against a brick wall.
- The union at the national level, the state level and even the district and local levels are controlled by the good old boy network and it is impossible to get any kind of change or innovation through.
- The entire system is hopeless broken and dysfunctional and the people in charge are just too powerful and immune to any kind of change.
- The people who run things are so entrenched and insulated that they act with impunity.
- There is just too much apathy to force any kind of change.

- I am nearing retirement, why should I bother to ruffle feathers or to create controversy?
- I do not know how to go about changing the structure or even how the union operates.
- I do not have the time or the energy to get too involved.
- The people who run things are just too powerful to challenge.

The answers to all of these questions are just very basic. Is there an identifiable problem?

1. Are you happy with the way the Union represents you?
 - a. Yes, everything is fine!
 - b. No, the union is not effectively representing me!
2. Are you happy with the way the union is structured as far as representing your local office?
 - a. Yes, everything is fine!
 - b. No, my local office is not well served by the union structure!
3. Are you happy with how the Union gets information to you?
 - a. Yes, everything is fine!
 - b. No, I either get no information, information is very late or I get almost no information!
4. Are you confident that the Union structure matches well against the resources of USPS?
 - a. Yes, everything is fine!
 - b. No, The union is over matched compared to USPS resources!
5. Do you think that the Union uses available resources in the most effective ways?
 - a. Yes, everything is fine!
 - b. No, the union does not make good use of available resources!
6. Are you confident that the Union evaluates structure, resources and needs on a regular basis to determine optimum membership representation?
 - a. Yes, everything is fine!
 - b. No, I do not think that the union adequately plans for the future or does any analysis of membership resources and representation>
7. Do you believe that the Union is doing the research necessary to match USPS now and in the future and documenting statistics and information technology to keep abreast of USPS which is heavily involved in information technology and gathering of statistics?
 - a. Yes, everything is fine!
 - b. No, they are not doing it or they are not devoting enough resources to keeping pace.
8. Do you believe that essentially the same union structure that has been in place since 1972 is adequate to match USPS structure which has changed several times in the interim and which is

becoming more top loaded with management then they ever were before?

a. Yes, everything is fine!

b. No, absolutely not. Since the best chances of resolving local disagreements were at the lower levels before and increasingly managers are given less and less flexibility, resolution of local issues is increasingly becoming harder and harder. Also, The union structure provides a broad range of leeway, competence and suitability while USPS structure is increasingly more centralized, resolution of issues much narrower and where management representatives follow strict protocols that result in more uniform resolutions throughout USPS.

If you answered A to all of the above questions, Mr. State Steward or Mr. Senior State Officer, it might be a good time to get out and talk to carriers and relief employees throughout your area of responsibility.

If you answered B to any of the previous questions, you recognize that we have problems and that is the first step toward progress. If you answered B to all or most of the previous questions, you realize we are really falling behind and we are no longer serving our membership well.

Once you have recognized that there is a problem, then you must also recognize that there is a definite ennui that prevents positive action to address these problems. There is a significant faction of carriers either with a personal interest in maintaining the status quo because they derive a personal benefit from it or because change could endanger their “positions of power and prestige”. Other carriers are just not interested in change, preferring the morass they know from the bother of issues they do not know. For those afraid of change or unwilling to change; I have news...change, like it or not is coming and if we cannot match that change effectively we end up being the roadkill after the steam roller passes over us. You know big change is coming. You know when our current work methods are stacked up against big change, our union structure and our resources are not sufficient or effective to match or contest how that change is applied to our fellow craft members and to us. Honestly, when USPS has trotted out the SECRET WEAPON (We have to control costs, costs are our ruination, we have to automate, we have to realize savings from automation to recapture our exorbitant costs for automation and postal employees are bloated, over paid and under worked fat cats), we have rarely even held our own, let alone win any arbitration.

If you do not know that we are no longer capable of contesting with USPS when it comes to dollars vs. controlling costs and automating the mail to save the mail delivery business. If you do not know that you have not been following our dismal record in interest arbitrations.

Even if our system is completely broken and completely dysfunctional; we can't walk away. The stakes are too high. 110 years of rural delivery. Entire careers of honorable service, long traditions and a

worthy and historic heritage. The careers of new employees who are coming into rural delivery and the expectations of the customers on 67, 584 rural routes throughout the country. Every single day rural carriers bring the entire world to millions and millions of rural customers right to their mailboxes.

We must find ways to let national officers, state officers/stewards that we need to do everything possible to remain vital and relevant. That because something works well one time, it doesn't mean it will work well every time. We need to find a way to take the self-interest, the surliness, the privilege and the arrogance out of union representation and we need to work everyday to improve the system, to make it responsive and to squeeze it until it works like it is supposed to.

Me! I have been retired for five years. My father retired after me as an RCA; but what happens is till too important not to care about what happens. I have no personal stake. I can gain nothing. But, I worked my entire career as a rural carrier, union officer and steward to build. I do not relish standing by and watching what I tried to build locally, on the state level and on the National level crumble into dust and distant memory because of the self-interest and self importance of people who put their own interests ahead of the people they are supposed to be representing.

I know what it means to be a state steward and what it means when you are no longer a state steward. As a state steward, many union people perceive you to be special simply because you are a state steward or some other title or position. When I ceased to be a state steward in 1990, it was like I dropped off the face of the earth. I was no longer as highly regarded; until I became a senior steward in 1992 and state steward again. Even today, people will hear of me and say "who the hell are you" and then if they learn that I was a state steward in two states, suddenly, I have prestige. It is completely and totally bogus and more than a little depressing especially when I think back on some really corrupt state stewards or really incompetent state stewards from the past. If it connects me with the current state steward in New Jersey; well, I am highly offended and reject any such comparison.

I have illustrated the criteria to use in identifying whether we have a problem with the structure of the union. I have also listed some of the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that need to be overcome to redress a "broken system" and I have described why it is important to make the effort.

What should be done. We need to keep changing whatever stands in the way of fixing our problems. If it is on the local level, get rid of the people who are not forcing change or recognizing the problem. If someone is in their position as steward or officer simply to get off their route (a growing problem now that carrying the mail is harder to do), they need to understand that they do the job with vitality, with energy and effectively or they go back to their routes; the same on the state level and also on the national level, with delegates to state and national conventions. **DO NOT SIMPLY VOTE FOR SOMEONE BECAUSE THEY ARE YOUR FRIEND OR YOU KNOW THEIR NAME; VOTE FOR**

PEOPLE WHO WILL BE YOUR BEST REPRESENTATIVES.

Whatever it takes. Two carriers in Maine changed a long standing practice of the NRLCA that was an issue for years and years when they filed an EEO complaint alleging that the NRLCA was endorsing a specific religion. Whether or not you agree with the rationale or the result, what they did effectively changed a long standing policy going back for decades and decades.

I think of the few Sons of Liberty who set up networks of like minded individuals who objected to their government. How they persisted and built support until a group fired upon government patrols. When delegates assembled in Philadelphia and declared their independence from Great Britain voting on July 2, 1776; half of the population was neutral. Of the remaining half, a little more than a quarter of the population actually supported independence and those figures with some minor movement remained fairly constant through the end of the war in 1781. In 1775 and 1776 the efforts of a few committed men grew into something much bigger and they changed the world.

Even if it takes completely dismantling the system and jury rigging a temporary system; a broken system needs to be fixed or replaced wholesale. Our system is broken; how will you help to fix it?

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