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Home » Blogs » chriswong's blog

U.S. Postal Service Downsizing May Affect Minorities



In an age when transactions increasingly occur electronically, many older Asian-American residents still look forward to receiving hand letters and advertisements, and enjoy international mail delivery including foreign newspapers and magazines. Visiting the Post Office has always been an excuse to catch up with the neighbors. Only at government-run hubs has there been ever timely and familiar services traditionally delivered at affordable low costs and without the commercial pressures of visiting a franchise where people may speak English only.

Now, all that is about to change. In an effort to decrease cost over-runs stemming from a 2006 Congressional mandate that the USPS pre-fund retiree health benefits, H.R. 2309 Postal Reform Act of 2011 is before the Senate, a bill that will "require the USPS to make a minimum of \$3 billion worth of cuts in post offices and mail processing facilities within two years" ("USPS Plan").

Already over the past several years, the USPS has closed many smaller community post offices and units. The number of layoffs affects civilians nationwide because it has been the nation's largest civilian employer, employing up to 574,000 employees even in 2011 ("United States Postal Service"). Many of the closings do not make national headlines, but the worries create a ripple effect in many smaller communities where the Post Office serves as its hearth. When Post Offices open, it is often a status symbol for the community that it is a recognized township, particularly in rural areas, so what does a closure signify?

Steve Hutkins, editor of the blog "Save the Post Office" writes:

This plan to close 250 processing plants, on top of plans to shutter 15,000 of the nation's 32,000 post offices and slash 225,000 postal jobs, will do nothing but hasten the Postal Service's downward spiral. ("Downsize Means Destroy.") [See Note*]

In fact, after the largest civilian employer sheds hundreds of thousands of jobs, the largest civilian employer will be Walmart, a corporation known for the number of part-time workers hired, often without health insurance or pension plans.

This crisis comes at a time when public sector workers increasingly feel threatened over the legitimacy of their collective bargaining powers. On March 9, 2011, the Governor of Wisconsin and "Republican state senators passed a bill that attacks middle-class families in Wisconsin by stripping public workers of their right to a voice at work, with a vote of 18-1" ("The Organized Attack on Public Employees"). According to Henni Espinosa and Steve Angeles of *Balitang America*, "over the past three years, 100,000 jobs have been eliminated by the USPS," and in San Francisco at least "200 workers have been affected" ("Filipino Workers").

Minority postal workers, including Asian-Pacific Americans, may be disproportionately affected by the plant closures and reductions in force. This is because for many immigrants and high school graduates, the USPS provides a good, steady, well-paid job with opportunities to advance. For minority women, in particular, they have more power in representation, and equal opportunity against situations of workplace exploitation.

In "African American Lose Most With Post Office Closures," NAD contextualized the National Public Radio interview with former mail carrier Philip Rubio to emphasize the historic importance of the USPS as a "gateway for many black workers into the middle class." Professor Rubio said:

In my book "There's Always Work at the Post Office," because they couldn't get jobs, you know, lot of private-sector jobs starting after the Civil War, discrimination by white employers and unions, and it did become a route to the middle class. In the process it also became expanded so that since the 1960s, about one-fifth of the post workforce has been African-American. But it's also expanded to now being 37 percent female, 8 percent Hispanic, 8 percent Asian.

Personally, I am also acquainted with friends of the family who were thankful to be employed by the USPS, because even though they held advanced degrees from overseas, they had difficulty finding a job.

However, like many factory jobs, the kinds of representations which minorities receive vary according to ethnicity. Often, when selecting employees for reduction in hours, middle-management supervisors target the most vulnerable. According to Espinosa and Angeles, "Protesters said management also targets elderly employees — by relocating them hundreds of miles away from their families — if they want to keep their jobs" ("Filipino Workers"). The issues in adequate APWU and USPS representation specific to Asian-Pacific American at the upper levels of management are a factor in how things play out, according to commentator Lester Yee:

Race had nothing to do with downsizing but if senior management had better representation of AAPI in senior level positions, they could have more effectively began working with the employee groups, communicating better and perhaps develop a better understanding of the cultural impacts that affect the downsizing. ("Filipino Postal Workers Protest Cuts")

Bay Citizen blogger Odette Keeley in "Filipino Postal Workers Protest Cuts" wrote that the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) estimates that 40 percent of the 1,600 clerks in San Francisco are Filipino, but many Filipino postal workers underwent

She is doing a really great
1 year 29 weeks ago

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1 year 32 weeks ago

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1 year 32 weeks ago

I am so proud of Janet in her
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- Users by points

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- APA for Progress RSS Feed

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Check out our archives

- November 2013 (3)
- October 2013 (2)
- September 2013 (1)
- August 2013 (4)
- July 2013 (3)
- June 2013 (1)
- May 2013 (3)
- April 2013 (7)
- March 2013 (7)
- February 2013 (3)

1 2 3 4 5 6
7 8 next last »

reduced hours, even while temporaries were hired during the holiday season. Asked about this, USPS spokesperson James Wigdel "explained that management chose to hire part-time employees during the holiday season — when mail volume increases — because their schedules are more flexible."

Clearly there have been reductions in mail volume due to internet use and ordering stamps online, nevertheless, according to Steve Hutkins, "It's a long-term, gradual, systemic problem that calls for long-term, gradual changes — perhaps gradual downsizing, but preferably alternatives, like giving the Postal Service the ability to develop new products and services to make up for the lost revenue" ("Save the Post Office").

The intangible benefits of postal shutdowns need to be weighed out. In "As Public Sector Sheds Jobs, Blacks are Hardest Hit," *New York Times* reporter Timothy Williams writes:

A study by the Center for Labor Research and Education at the University of California this spring concluded, "Any analysis of the impact to society of additional layoffs in the public sector as a strategy to address the fiscal crisis should take into account the disproportionate impact the reductions in government employment have on the black community."

How can one weigh the losses or benefits for home-bound residents who rely on timely delivery of medical supplies. Why must the poor suffer inordinately because of lack of internet access? Why must rural residents drive farther or be forced to use private mail services while urban residents are far less inconvenienced? Often the postal worker is a familiar friendly face who can discriminate when patrons are out of town versus experiencing an emergency.

So many questions appeared to be unanswered, while the skeptics already blame this crisis upon the virtually unlimited federal defense spending--- for all the Postal Service budget challenges, it's red-ink is dwarfed by the vast sums of tax-payer monies awarded for 2012 defense contracts such as for new high frequency satellites, inventorying rare earths, and the 8 billion dollar base in Guam ("H.R. 1540").

Must we beg the question exactly what are the recession priorities for America? If the intangible benefits of supporting services integral to the survival of this nation's small businesses and rural communities, much less to the postal workers and their families themselves can be so callously disregarded, what can happen next? Already one can envision that it may be teachers, scientists, emergency workers, and the National Endowment for the Arts....

It appears that a dangerous precedent is in the making. This is why APWU President Cliff Guffey (<http://www.apwu.org/news/webart/2011/11-128-servicestandards-111205.htm>), NALC President Fredric Rolando, and Citizens founder Ralph Nader (see "Time to Save the Post Office") are asking citizens to write and petition Congress to ask for a 6-month moratorium.

You too, can help by learning more about this issue by visiting

<http://www.saveamericaspostalservice.org/2309.html>.

---Photo Credit *Balitang America*, Research and article by chriswong

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*Note: Number of post offices being studied for closure quoted from *Time* magazine article by Josh Sanburn; also paragraph "On Post Office Closings" subsection under "The New York Times Editorial" by Steve Hutkins.

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