

“The Sons Of Bitches Just Won’t Work: Postal Workers against The State

Peter Taylor

1965 marks the turning point in the history of workers’ struggles in the Canadian postal system. From that point onwards, workers’ insubordination has mounted steadily, and now constitutes a major challenge to capital’s authority. With business and the State relying heavily on the mail system for the circulation of capital, this militancy has placed postal workers in a leading position in the quickening work-place struggle going on throughout the country. In reaction, the Canadian State is spending more than \$900 million on the introduction of automatic sorting machines. More than simply regaining ground lost to postal workers in terms of wages and productivity, the State is calling on science to “develop” the technical organization of the work process in order to decompose an increasingly unified workforce.

Taken by itself, however, the automation program will not allow the State to re-impose control. Not only have postal workers repeatedly challenged, and beaten, the State over the last ten years — particularly by engaging in illegal strikes — but they have also appropriated those forms of struggle developed primarily by assembly-line and other mass workers. Absenteeism, turnover, sabotage, and wildcats, have all been used by postal workers to establish their autonomy from capital. Acting on their needs for more money and less work — for more power against capital — they have thrown the postal system into crisis. The depth of this crisis can be seen in the desperation of the Postmaster General. Claiming recently that the “sons of bitches just won’t work” he has threatened to “close the Montreal Post Office for several months to get rid of militants and slackers”. And with other Post Office spokesmen predicting delays in mail delivery for at least another year, struggles by postal workers will continue to deepen the crisis at the Post Office and be a significant reference point for the rest of the Canadian working class.

The Centrality of Skill in the Traditional Post Office.

In all postal systems, the central operation is that of sorting mail.

Consisting essentially of redirecting individual pieces of mail according to the handwritten or typed address, this task requires a unique skill, and, as a result, has formed the core of the organization of work at the Post Office. Traditionally—until the late Sixties for Canada—the postal system utilized the male, skilled, manual sorter, or postal clerk, to perform this function. In turn, the skilled clerks used the possession of this skill to establish themselves as the most powerful group of postal workers. First, this skill, which was based on the ability to recall correctly and quickly the location of some 10,000 points of distribution, gave them direct control over the speed of work, unlike, say, workers on an assembly-line whose work speed is dictated by a machine. Furthermore, since this ability was acquired only by working three or four months at a Post Office run “school”, management could not readily use scabs during any strike or slowdown.

Historically, the power of the skilled sorters has been demonstrated most clearly by their position at the top of a hierarchy of wages. Due to the centrality of their skill, the level of their wages functioned, until very recently, as the reference point for all other classifications of postal workers. For example, when truck drivers who had previously moved mail between postal stations for private contractors, were made Post Office employees, their job was classified as “unskilled”. As a result, their wages, which had been on par with other truckers, were reduced drastically to bring them in line with those of other “unskilled” postal workers. (This was the background to the struggle of the Lapalme drivers in Montreal, and the wildcats by drivers in Toronto during the fall of 1972.)

The power of the postal clerks was also reflected in their central role in the trade union organization of postal workers. The first union at the Post Office was a skilled sorter’s union. Formed in 1911, this union was affiliated with the Trades and Labour Congress — a federation of predominantly skilled workers’ unions. Since then, although the unskilled “inside” workers joined the clerks in 1928, the union has consistently represented the special interests of skilled sorters, both by the emphasis placed on the defense of the classification system, and by the election of clerks to positions of regional and national leadership. The semi-skilled “outside” workers reacted against this domination by refusing to join the skilled sorters’ union, and instead formed and have maintained their own union organization. In short, the possession of this skill by certain postal workers allowed them to establish a definite form of control over their immediate work situation, both in terms of the organization of work and the organization of wages.

At the same time, however, this power of the skilled clerks was

operating in the interest of capital's rule. Precisely because their source of power was the special skill needed by the postal system, postal clerks were directly tied to their work. Thus, rather than challenging the role within the mail system which capital had assigned to them, the skilled sorters maintained their power—in terms of both wages and union organization—by accepting the responsibility for its operation. As was the case for other skilled workers, this responsibility for production resulted in postal clerks having a “producer's consciousness”, i.e., an understanding that their power depended on their ability to perform their work. This identification of the clerks with their work was reinforced by the individual nature of their jobs. For example, contests were frequently held for the purpose of determining who was the “best sorter”. The possession of this skill by the clerks also furthered capital's control by separating them from the “unskilled” workers, thus preventing a unified workforce. As a result, postal workers not only refrained from engaging in large strikes, but, more importantly, in their daily job performance they exhibited a marked commitment to “getting the mail out.”

Their lack of militancy was also sustained by other factors which, until the Sixties allowed the Post Office to operate with little concern for its efficiency. First among these factors was their security of income. With the volume of mail constantly rising, postal workers, like other government service employees, had been guaranteed steady employment — as long as they performed their jobs satisfactorily. Job security also represented an alternative to the high wages won by workers in the manufacturing and resource sectors, whose high income was often reduced by the fluctuations of the business cycle.

Reinforcing job security as a conservative force was the “white-collar” status of letter sorting. Deriving from the relative cleanliness of the job and the “financial” rather than “industrial” nature of mail itself, postal work was considered an “office job”. Shirt-and-tie was the rule for all employees, and even today it is still possible to find long-time employees appearing for work dressed like supervisors. Closely tied in with this, were two factors which helped to foster the notion of “public service”. First, that personal letters and cards formed a much higher percentage of mail volumes; second, there was a more direct personal relation between the letter carrier and the tenant or homeowner.

Finally, there existed a set of federal laws designed to maintain the subordination of postal workers. All forms of industrial action — work stoppages, slowdowns — were expressly prohibited. Furthermore, management thoroughly dominated those limited avenues for collective bargaining which did exist. Directly stemming from postal workers' lack of power with respect to the State, these laws formally institutionalized

this relation of forces.

Taken together, the skilled nature of the work, the security of income, and the harsh legal sanctions, resulted in a dedicated and disciplined workforce. Postal workers, who saw their role as that of “serving the public”, took as their own the slogan “the mail must go through”. For capital, of course, this “responsible behaviour”, which meant the moderation of demands on the part of postal workers, was crucial because it kept costs, in the form of wages, relatively low. Low costs and high quality work enabled the Post Office to operate very efficiently on a day-to-day basis. With this high level of productivity the government managed to balance the Post Office budget every year until 1965. Precisely because the manual sorting system was operating smoothly, the State was able to avoid costly expenditures for mechanization and plant renovations. In contrast to other workers — notably manufacturing and mining workers, as well as office workers — who were subject to the introduction of whole systems of increasingly demanding automated machines, the postal worker found the technology of his job remaining unchanged.

1965: The Opening Round in the Current Cycle of Struggle

Following the recessions of 1958 and 1960-61, capital in Canada entered a period of rapid expansion. With working class resistance effectively reduced by these recessions — real per capita income fell between 1957 and 1959; unemployment reached 7.7% in 1961 — capital expanded by exploiting this weakness. Thus, between 1961 and 1965 output per worker was forced up over 14%. Over the same period, strike activity fell below .09% of total working time — the lowest level in over 25 years. As a result, wage settlements in Canada lagged behind those in other countries, and in 1964 profits accounted for 15.3% of the GNP — an eight year high. The next year saw unemployment drop below 4% for the first time in more than a decade, despite a rapid growth in the labour force, and new records were also set in gross national product, and in investment and export levels¹.

For the postal system this growth in economic activity created a sizeable increase in the volume of mail. Reflecting the increasing use of business of the mail system, the number of pieces of mail processed rose by over 12% from 1962 to 1965. Faced with this growing pile of mail — over nine million pieces a day by 1965 — the government needed to bolster productivity in order to contain labour costs. To this end it created lower paying, unskilled, part-time jobs and hired women, who because they came from unpaid, full-time jobs as housewives, lacked the power to refuse these lower wages. Furthermore, management began to

use "casual" workers, i.e., temporary workers who received lower wages, no benefits, were completely subject to lay-offs at management's discretion, and were outside the union. Since both "part-timers" and "casuals" lacked the power of the full-time workers, management was able to extract a greater output even as it paid them lower wages.

The introduction of unskilled sorters also allowed management to increase its pressure on the full-time skilled sorter. Arguing that the unskilled workers were sorting more quickly, and threatening to increase the number of "part-timers" and "casuals", management forced up the full-time clerk's output by over 3% between 1962 and 1965. As a direct result of this speed-up and the related introduction of the unskilled sorters, postal clerks began to break their identification with their work. Not only were they no longer solely responsible for the key operation of the mail system; but, with management threatening to use more unskilled sorters, it was also clear that their position within the Post Office hierarchy was no longer secure. Furthermore, their wages, which had always been below those of workers outside the Post Office, were deteriorating even more. Thus by 1965, the *Vancouver Sun* could report that "postmen on the west coast received \$3,000 per annum less than firemen or policemen of comparable seniority and \$2,000 less than common labour employed by the city".²

Over the same period, prices were steadily rising from the no-increase registered in 1961, and by 1965 inflation had reached 3%. As a result, there was a resurgence of strike activity. Auto workers in Oshawa, Oakville, and Windsor, machinists in Montreal, and construction workers in Toronto held massive strikes accounting for more than 3/4 of a million striker-days. Encouraged by this sharp outbreak in militancy, postal workers put forward a demand for a \$660 wage increase in July 1965.

The government, making the first of a series of blunders, responded by offering only \$300-\$360. Dissatisfaction among the workers was widespread, but the two major postal unions tried to restrain workers by warning them that walkouts would be unauthorized and illegal. The response was immediate: wildcat strikes broke out in Montreal and Vancouver. In short order postal workers in Toronto, along with workers across the country, joined in. At this point Post Office authorities were forced to place an embargo on all 2nd, 3rd, and 4th class mail.

Caught off balance by the workers' militancy, the government's reaction was confused. There were pleas from the Prime Minister asking workers to return; warnings from the Revenue Minister that the demands would not be granted through illegal action; and praise for the unions' "responsibility". None of these, including injunctions against

workers in Montreal and Vancouver, were successful however, and by the third day the illegal wildcat was 100% effective in the major financial centers. At the same time, the unions continued to maintain negotiations with the government and it wasn't until the 11th day of the strike that they officially endorsed the strike. In response, the government announced it was considering 1) the dismissal of the 4,100 striking postal workers in Montreal, 2) special legislation to end the walkout, and 3) the use of the army to move the mail. In turn, this escalation brought a pledge of "full support" for the cause of postal workers from the Canadian Labour Congress.

The government, apparently unprepared for the widespread support gained by the illegal strike, then made a major concession. They increased their wage offer to \$510-\$550, and agreed to investigate Post Office work rules and working conditions. Workers' opposition to this proposal was widespread, and in Montreal they overwhelmingly voted it down. Across the nation as a whole, however, the majority favoured a return to work. After gaining a few more concessions, some work was resumed on Aug. 7, and by Aug. 9, three weeks after it had started, the postal wildcat was over. 12,250 postal workers had taken on both the government and "their" union, and they had won. By showing determination and militancy, they had scored a resounding victory whose effect extended well beyond their substantial wage gain (over 12%) and as such established postal workers as a vanguard for the current wave of factory struggles.

First and foremost, the 1965 postal strike functioned as a reference point by demonstrating the critical dependence of capital on the mail system. Traditionally, business, which accounts for well over three-quarters of all mail processed, has relied heavily on the mail system for its cash flow. Then in the mid-Sixties with the rapid expansion of short-term credit through the use of credit cards, the mail system became an even more crucial link in the circuit of capital. As a result, even brief interruptions in mail service severely damage business. In 1974, for example, a Bank of Canada spokesman blamed the two-week wildcat for driving short-term rates up to 11.13% by "disrupting the delivery of payments through the mail"³. The best summary of this dependence of capital on the postal system appears in an ad for a postage meter company; it simply states: "The faster the mail goes out, the faster the money moves in".

Secondly, struggles by postal workers function as a reference point because of the highly visible character of interruptions in the mail service. Unlike strikes by mining or manufacturing workers which in Canada tend to be isolated in industrial communities located away from

the major cities, work stoppages by postal workers affect everyone. Thus, even one-day walkouts have a mass impact — often grabbing headlines in the process.

The significance of struggles by postal workers also flows from their position as federal employees. As government employees, they are forced to confront the State, not merely as the representative and guardian of the “public interest”, but also as their employer who directly commands their own labour power. Or more precisely, they can see that the effort of the State to ensure the continued reproduction of capitalist society depend directly on its enforcement of work-discipline on the shop-floor. The willingness of postal workers to engage in *illegal* strikes — 26 of the last 27 stoppages have been illegal — is a direct result. After all, laws ordering them back to work are simply other, more heavy-handed attempts on the part of the employer to enforce the work process.

Being federal employees is of added significance because it establishes a material link between workers scattered throughout the country. In Canada, where the working class is divided geographically into 5 distinct, very large regions, this linkage provided by the State’s organization has proved to be crucial in spreading struggles. For example, in 1965 the nation-wide strike by postal workers helped to generalize, and thereby strengthen, a growing strike wave which had been concentrated primarily in Ontario and Quebec.

At the national level, the vanguard position established by postal workers through their 1965 strike was confirmed by the reaction of the State: it immediately began the preparation of legislation granting full collective bargaining to all federal workers. Previously there had been only limited avenues for the peaceful resolution of grievances and the negotiations of contracts. Now, after postal workers had dramatically broken with their “civil-servant” tradition, it became imperative that labour-management relations be formalized by bringing into play the full weight of State regulations surrounding collective bargaining. This requirement on the part of the State was forcefully underlined by federal workers’ struggles which took place the following year. Thus in the spring of 1967 the Canadian State enacted the *Public Service Staff Relation Act*, thereby legalizing the strike weapon for some 200,000 State workers.

But while the central position occupied by postal workers in capital’s organizations of society has allowed them to play a leading role at the national level, the power of postal workers has been consolidated through the daily struggles on the shop-floor. The 1965 strike had thrown the Post Office into crisis. By winning a wage increase in excess

of 12% postal workers had broken the link between wages and productivity. In response, the State, which desperately needed to re-establish this link, launched a series of attacks aimed at increasing the amount of work done — at extracting a greater amount of surplus value. Postal workers, however, were not about to submit to this increased exploitation. On the contrary, having just gained some autonomy from capital, they were now better prepared to act on their need for more money and less work. As a result, postal workers and the State became locked in an increasingly bitter struggle.

The immediate result of the increased power that derived from the victorious 1965 strike was increased resistance on the shop-floor. With a defeat of the State now under their belts, postal workers were not going to be pushed around by a bunch of supervisors. Thus management, whose goal could be simply stated as *increased productivity*, found its implementation next to impossible. The key element in the resistance of postal workers was the clerk's possession of the skill needed to keep the mail system going, and the accompanying control over the work process which that gave them. Productivity counts, counselings, and other forms of harassment, which had raised output prior to the 1965 strike, now had the reverse effect. No longer intimidated by these attacks, postal workers saw them clearly as provocations and thus used their control over production to slow the process down. Soon it became obvious to management that if they were to increase the work done they had to break the power of the skilled clerk.

Their first attempt, however, completely misread the strengths of postal workers. Consisting of two prongs, this attack attempted first to undermine the control of the skilled sorter by increasing the use of unskilled, but still manual, sortation techniques. Secondly, drawing on their success with the part-timers, they increased the number of women and young workers in full-time positions. Their hope was that these workers would be easier to control owing to their lack of experience with factory struggles. In actuality, this attempt backfired. Rather than increasing production, this strategy actually gave more power to the workers and thus only served to intensify the struggle.

The major miscalculation was their assessment of the on-the-job performance of women and young workers. Unlike their peers of even a decade earlier, young workers by the mid-Sixties possessed a "significant amount of economic freedom".⁴ Rooted in part in the "affluence" gained by the working class since the Second World War, this power of the young workers has resulted in "high job expectations" and a "weak attachment to the labour force"⁵. Strengthened by the struggles of blacks, students, and women against their particular social function,

these young workers have formed a "new class of worker" whose main characteristic is a refusal to accept the tyrannical discipline of waged work as a condition of life⁶.

At the Post Office, this rebelliousness was made all the more successful by a work process which, unlike that in the more common automated or mechanized plant, lacked a system of machine-imposed controls. Trying to run a mail system which relied on the willingness to work out of a sense of "duty", on the identification with work as the "way to get ahead", the Post Office management found itself unprepared to handle the insubordination of these mass workers. Over the last 8-10 years, as their number has increased, the refusal of these workers — expressed through absenteeism, turnover, sabotage — has come to dominate the struggle at the Post Office.

The power of the postal workers also grew as a result of the other prong of management's plan. Through the increased use of unskilled sortation, management not only undermined the division between skilled and unskilled workers, but also eroded the skilled sorters' identification with their work. Increasingly therefore, the job was looked upon purely as a source of money. At the same time, this unskilled sortation (which separated mail alphabetically rather than geographically) still left the actual movement of mail in the hands of postal workers. Thus, although letters could be sorted more quickly in this simplified process, the system still depended on the workers to set the pace. Certainly the supervisors were quick to harass any worker who was "too slow", but now, with the commitment to work greatly diminished, they found it necessary to push harder and harder. In turn, this increased pressure only served to stimulate further acts of resistance by all categories of postal workers. Taken together, these changes, in both the composition of the workforce and in the system of mail sortation, consolidated the strength of postal workers.

Over the same period, the increasing power of postal workers caused a sharpening of the struggle over working conditions. Previous to the 1965 walkout, management, feeling no pressure from the workers, had refrained from making necessary renovations. Then, as part of the strike settlement, they had been forced to agree to make an investigation into the deteriorating working conditions. The report which followed supported the workers' grievances, and listed some 300 needed improvements, including the installation of new washroom and cafeteria facilities in many Post Offices. But, because the government was reluctant to spend any more money on postal workers, the correction of these conditions was slow to follow. By 1968 only half the recommendations had been acted on, and that summer, postal workers, angered by

the stinginess of the government, made their second national strike.

Again, as in 1965, this mail strike was a reference point for the rest of the working class. Involving 24,000 postal workers (14,000 "inside" workers, 10,000 "outside" workers), this strike was the largest and most widespread of those which took place in 1968. More importantly, it was also the first strike under the new legislation which made strikes by State workers legal. Thus postal workers, whose previous strike had provoked this legislation, were now setting the pace for other federal workers whose contracts were also being negotiated. As the *Globe & Mail* headlined during the strike: "165,000 civil servants eye postal offer".

By 1968, the government was much more determined to avoid the disaster of the 1965 strike. By holding the line with postal workers, the State planned to contain the wage demands of all federal workers, and if possible, discredit the strike weapon. This strike also found the unions much better prepared than in 1965, when they had been outflanked by a militant rank and file. In accordance with the new legislation, they had been re-organized so that the "inside" workers' union and the letter carriers' union carried on joint negotiations with the government. By allowing each union executive to blame the other for any lack of progress, this arrangement served to defuse the workers' militancy. Furthermore, the old, discredited leadership had been replaced by local officials who had been prominent in the 1965 strike.

Throughout the negotiations the government refused to make an offer. Then the unions, whose initial demand of 30% over one year was still on the table, finally set July 18 as the strike date. The government waited until July 17 before making its move. First, it began the planned embargo on all mail and second, it put forward an offer of 6%. Predictably, this was rejected on the spot by the union negotiators. The offer had deliberately been made too late to stop the strike. It appeared that the government was counting on an extended strike to soften up postal workers.

The next day the strike began on schedule as postal workers across the country walked out. Immediately business set up a howl. Claiming that they (and the "public") were being irreparably damaged, their only solution was for the government to legislate postal workers back to work *and* then to outlaw all further strikes by federal workers. The government meanwhile was playing a waiting game, and their next move only came 2 weeks later when they offered 19% over 38 months. Representing simply a longer version of the initial offer, the unions turned it down and the strike went into its third week. Calling on the government to intervene "in the public interest" more business and government leaders spoke out against the strike. Five days later the

Prime Minister, apparently bowing to this pressure, let it be known that he was considering asking the cabinet to intervene, unless substantial progress was made. That night the Post Office made its third offer: 15.1% over 26 months. Although it represented only a marginal improvement over the first offer, union negotiators, with the Prime Minister's threat ringing in their ears, found it acceptable. The reaction of the workers, who by this time had lost three weeks pay, was less favourable. But after a number of very heated meetings during which the union leaders recalled their militance in the 1965 strike, they were able to convince the workers it was the best possible settlement. Consequently, although the vote was "very close", work resumed on Aug. 8.

The results of this strike clearly favoured the State. The wage demand of postal workers had been contained, thereby setting an upper limit for all State workers — a limit which was not broken. By refusing to budge from its initial position, while threatening to use its legislative power to impose a settlement, the government had scored a victory at the bargaining table. In the process, it was able to successfully make use of the union structure. First, by maintaining a hard line it allowed the lack of strike pay, together with three weeks' lost pay, to undermine the workers' bargaining position. Secondly, the government used the union leaders to convince the workers that the settlement was acceptable — something which the government by itself could not have done.

But while the State had managed to "hold the line" during this particular skirmish, through the very act of striking, postal workers had dramatized their mounting struggle against work. By taking a three-week "holiday" during the prime holiday period, they had completely disrupted the mail service, thus preventing the State from maintaining a vital function. For capital, therefore, its long-term goal remained unreachd: much more than just a favourable strike settlement was needed if it was to succeed in moving the mail "efficiently", i.e., if it was to increase the ratio of work done to wages paid.

Automation: "The Technological Path to Repression"

Fed by the increasing disaffection of the skilled workers and the introduction of the mass worker, the State faced an increasingly effective shop-floor struggle, which stated succinctly consisted of getting as much as possible for the least possible work. For example, the practice of gaining time off for breaks, etc., by slowing down, or "dogging it", was enjoying increasing success. Developed most by skilled workers, this form of struggle was spreading to include all other categories of workers as well. Along with it, absenteeism and turnover were rising steadily to produce a less and less stable workforce and

higher labour costs.

For capital, of course, all this meant an increasingly “inefficient” mail system. Between 1965 and 1968 mail volume rose by 8% while output per worker fell by 8%. As a result management was forced to increase the workforce by more than 15%. Each increase, of course, only served to institutionalize a new lower rate of production. In turn, this new rate became the level from which postal workers slowed down even further.

Traditionally management would have used two weapons, i.e., firings and increased harassment, to break this declining “productivity spiral”. At the Post Office, however, precisely because of the dependence of the system on the skill which the workers possessed, these weapons were too costly. Firings on a large scale were out, not only because over 3-4 months training had been invested in each worker, but also because it would have taken that long to train a new workforce — during which time business needed its mail. Furthermore, management, facing a shortage of labour, needed every worker they could get. The control over the work process also meant that the workers responded to all forms of shop-floor harassment by simply intensifying the “productivity spiral”. Consequently, by 1972 output per worker was a full 12.5% lower than it had been in 1965.⁷

On the one hand, therefore, postal workers were drastically reducing the amount of work they were forced to do. On the other hand, they were also successfully increasing the amount of money they received. On the strength of their struggles during the three years from 1965 to 1968 they made a wage gain of 18%, discounting inflation; in contrast, they made only a 14% increase over the preceding six years (from 1958-64). As more workers made more money, labour costs accounted for an ever increasing share of the total Post Office budget. Thus, by 1969, postal workers were imposing on the State *decreasing productivity along with large wage increases as conditions for the continued operation of the postal system.*

Taken overall, the gains made by postal workers were reflected in the deteriorating financial position of the Post Office. From its first budget deficit of \$34 million, recorded in 1965, the Post Office moved steadily further into the red, reaching a figure of \$88 million by 1969. At the same time, business was increasing its reliance on the mail system. Spurred on by a rapid increase in the bulk mailings — billings, advertisements, etc., — needed to maintain their financial position, the volume of mail has doubled since 1967. Business mail now accounts for 85% of the 20 million pieces processed each day. As a consequence of this growth, postal operations became increasingly *centralized* in the major financial centers of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver.

The priority given by the Post Office to the needs of business can be seen in the decisions made in the late Sixties to institute a host of special programs — notably the “guaranteed next-day delivery” — while at the same time eliminating the “non-essential” Saturday delivery in the urban centers. But while these changes clearly favoured business, they did nothing to challenge capital’s major obstacle: the shop-floor struggle against work by postal workers.

By the fall of 1969 the government was finally forced to admit that its long-term goal — the restoration of “profitability” through the suppression of this struggle—would require a fundamental re-organization of the work process. In November of that year the Postmaster General received a report entitled *A Blueprint for Change: Canada Post Office*. It began: “We propose in this report to be blunt, because we believe that the Canada Post Office is at a crossroads in its history”⁸. And, although this particular study was concerned primarily with the re-organization of the management bureaucracy, it clearly identified the problem they faced, and in broad terms, sketched the outline of the State’s second, more concerted attack. The problem was defined variously as “strikes”, “Annual Deficits”, “rising costs, particularly labour costs”, “rising mail volumes”, “productivity rates”; in short, a mounting “inability to cope effectively with personnel problems”. Specifically, Post Office management was declared to lack the “control” necessary to ensure the “profitability” of the mail system.⁹ Then after noting that this “lag in productivity can be related to the failure of the Canada Post Office ... to introduce mechanical sortation processes”, they announced that “the introduction of automation is ... essential if total annual expenditures (i.e., wages) are to be controlled and, more important, if the postal system serving the country is to consistently meet current demands”¹⁰.

By introducing machines, the State planned to take possession of the skill of sorting away from the postal clerk, and incorporate it in a machine. In so doing, they would be eliminating the postal workers’ main source of power, thus inflicting a major defeat on them. First, by simply setting the speed of the machines, management could determine the production rate, and enormously increase the output per worker. These same machines would also help the supervisors enforce this higher speed; mis-sorts would be automatically rejected and the “offender” identified; a light on each machine would signal the absence of any worker; etc. In addition, the automation process would break up the informal shop-floor organization — the basic unit in the daily struggle to work less. This speed-up would also mean the more rapid deterioration of worker’s health. In Ottawa, for example, where these machines have been operating for three years, workers have complained bitterly of

eye-strain, frequent head-aches, and nerve problems.

Secondly, the State planned to decrease the wages of postal workers. By claiming that the job of the machine operator, or coder, was “unskilled” when compared to that of the postal clerk, the government planned to pay the coder 75¢ an hour (\$1500 a year) less. Even though coders and clerks performed equivalent functions, and despite the fact that each had the same needs, by using the skilled workers’ argument that the wage rewards the possession of a skill, the Post Office hoped to reduce its deficit simply by cutting its wage bill. For the workers, this wage cut would mean a loss of power, both in the supermarket (purchasing power) and in the Post Office (ability to go on strike, take time off, etc.).

Thirdly, the government hoped to break its “dependence” on those workers who possessed the “specialized knowledge of the workings of the mail system”.¹¹ By replacing this skill with “skills related to keyboard operation” — i.e., skills which are held by a very large number of workers since they are required by many different jobs — the Post Office would not only eliminate the need to extensively train its workers, but it would also gain the power to discharge any worker it considered “unproductive”. For the workers, the massification of their skills, meant increasing the available competition for their jobs, therefore rendering them more vulnerable to management’s demands for more work and less money, or for increased amounts of unpaid labour needed to restore “profitability”.

Fourthly, the introduction of the machines demonstrated again the specific use that the State makes of female workers. Already it had capitalized on the fact that they perform unpaid work in the home, by forcing them into part-time work at lower wages than men. Now, particularly because women also possessed the needed “keyboard skills” — as typists, key-punch operators, etc. — management planned to hire them on as coders. Thus although they would get less money as coders than postal clerks, the State hoped that these women would be satisfied with this wage level, precisely because their other alternatives paid even less.

Technological change, as Marx had clearly seen, is *not* neutral: “It would be possible to write quite a history of the inventions, made since 1830, for the sole purpose of supplying capital with weapons against the revolts of the working class”¹². Following this path — the “technological path to repression” — the Canadian State planned the automation of the postal system in order to impose a much greater level of exploitation¹³.

Certainly some resistance by postal workers was expected. As the

authors of *A Blueprint for Change* remarked: "particularly from those elements of the labour force that may be most directly affected by the introduction of automation"¹⁴. They added however that "resistance to change is of course inherent in the human being". Although with cost reductions in letter processing of 20% in the short term (up to 40% as the whole system becomes automated), they are clear that *any resistance* to their proposed plan must be overcome. This report also stressed the speed at which these machines should be introduced. For far too long a time the government had simply commissioned studies: now, they stated, it was time to produce a definite plan of action. And this sense of urgency proved more than justified when only six months later postal workers started their third national strike in five years.

1970: The Defeat of the State's Wage guideline

By 1970 the Canadian working class had captured a greater share of social wealth than at any time since the Second World War. As part of a much larger international wave of struggles, workers in Canada, whose work-place struggle was highlighted by a 350% increase in strike-days over the period 1964-70, had driven after-tax profits down to the point where they accounted for only 9.0% of the Gross National Product. Certainly capital, through increasing inflation — it reached an annual rate of 4.6% in June 1969 — was taking in a greater amount in the community, i.e., supermarkets, housing, transportation, etc. But this gain had been more than offset by the amount it was forced to pay out in wages. Thus in 1970 capital at last directly attacked the work-place struggle.

Production slowed dramatically to a 2.5% rate of increase — less than half the rate recorded a year earlier. In turn, this slowdown forced the unemployment rate up until it reached a figure of 6.4% that September — a jump of almost 40% in only one year. Besides saving the wages withheld from these workers, capital was also using them, and the threat of even more unemployment, to force down the wage demands of those still employed. Furthermore, through the Prices and Incomes Commission, the State was attempting to impose voluntary acceptance of wage guidelines. Consequently, after numerous discussions with business and labour, the State announced early in the year that a guideline of 6% a year — inflation plus productivity increase — was in effect.

In this struggle, the importance of State workers again came to the fore. Having gained the right to strike in 1967, federal workers, and in particular postal workers, had made effective use of this weapon in gaining substantial wage increases which often outstripped those in private industry. Now, in the midst of a more general attack, the State

planned to contain their wage gains, thereby setting a “good example” for settlements in the private sector, as well as directly saving money.

Then late that spring, after the government had successfully concluded several contracts within this limit, postal workers, whose contracts were also being negotiated, gave notice of their intention to challenge the government’s ceiling. On May 15, before the national office of the union had even set a strike date, 5000 Montreal postal workers took to the streets protesting the “slowness in negotiations” and demonstrating their refusal to accept the State’s wage limit. In the face of this show of strength, the “neutral” conciliation report itself broke the government’s ceiling and recommended an annual increase of 6.3% within a 30 month contract. For the government negotiators, however, this concession, which would have meant a major loss of face, was unacceptable. Instead they stuck to their original offer of 5.3% per year. For the union, which had wanted a 10% annual increase all along, neither offer was adequate and so, amid threats by workers of more “premature” walkouts, it announced May 26 as the start of the third national postal strike.

In their previous national strike, postal workers had completely shut down the mail system all across the country. As a result the government had threatened to legislate them back to work, and then used this threat to force a settlement. This time, the union leaders decided to hold a “rotating strike”, i.e., selective, short-term walkouts made in turn by different groups of workers. By disrupting rather than actually stopping the flow of mail, they hoped to pressure the government while avoiding a direct clash in which they might have been outflanked by workers who defied the back to work legislation. The State also wanted to avoid a direct clash, and so it decided to let these mini-strikes, which were only delaying the mail, drag on. Thus throughout June, July and August the rotating strikes continued. Hitting first one city, then another, these strikes kept the struggle of postal workers on the front pages of newspaper for the whole summer, thus focusing widespread attention on the final settlement.

Shortly after the strike began it became clear that the State’s wage ceiling of 6% a year would fall. Postal workers had already rejected the 6.3% contained in the conciliation report, and as the strike progressed, the government’s offers slowly rose. Thus by August, as pressure from business was building up, the government was already offering more than the conciliation report’s recommendation. Then on September 7th, after some talk by government officials of introducing legislation, they raised their offer above 7% per year. The union negotiators accepted immediately and the next day, postal workers — despite opposition in

Montreal and Vancouver — ratified the successful settlement. *The State's guideline lay in shambles.*

Unable to hold the line with postal workers it was forced to abandon all plans of a wage guideline. Over the next year, other workers — particularly the 6300 Air Canada machinists who also held a “rotating” strike — followed the lead of postal workers in winning wage increases exceeding the 6% per year mark. Postal workers, by disrupting capital's attack on the work-place, had inflicted their second major defeat on the government in 5 years, and thereby, continued their vanguard role. Far more than the \$14 million in lost revenue, this victory over the guideline emphasized the need of the State to regain “control” through automation.

The 1970 strike was significant in yet another respect: it revealed the growing antagonism between the union and the rank and file in the face of the State's plan for automation. Throughout the strike the union managed to use its position as the only formal link between cities to maintain overall control, thus avoiding a repetition of its 1965 experience. But this control, rather than reflecting the allegiance of the rank and file — workers in Montreal had broken union discipline by wildcatting “prematurely”; militants in Thunder Bay seized and burnt a truck-load of mail being moved by scab carriers — actually covered an emerging difference in political strategy on the question of automation. Thus the refusal of the union leaders to call the “all-out” strike demanded by the workers was not simply due to a fear of directly confronting the laws of the State. Much more fundamentally this moderation expressed the weakness inherent in their strategic orientation towards management's plan for automation: the sectoral defense of the wage level and working conditions of the skilled postal worker.

Having based its power on the ability of the skilled clerk to control the work process, the “inside” workers' union did not fail to recognize automation as a direct attack. As one union official put it: “If our classifications are destroyed and our work is done by machines and by Level 1's (management proposed that coders be placed in this, the lowest-paid category) we (the skilled clerks) will have no bargaining power whatsoever. Whatever power we have is based upon our ability to control the work in the Post Office”¹⁵. As a result, the union's demands were 1) that all full-time sorters be trained for the manual sorting system, even after most knowledge sortation had been phased out; and 2) that there be job rotation for full-time sorters, so all would get a chance to work on the few skilled jobs that remained. Of critical significance, however, was the fact that, at no point, did the union question the decision of management to introduce the automatic

machines. Thus, even though it accepted that the skilled clerk would no longer be required by the work process, the union hoped to artificially preserve his position. The weakness of union's strategy was predicted on the basic assumption held by all skilled workers and their unions: wages and working conditions are a reward for a job well done. Thus, it was argued, skilled workers "deserve" the highest wages precisely because of their ability to work more productively. This argument, of course, played directly into the hands of management — since coders were unskilled, they "deserved" lower wages.

But, while the union was adopting its strategy to deal with automation, postal workers were pursuing a course which led in exactly the opposite direction. Already they were using extra-union forms of struggle — "dogging it", absenteeism, etc. — to express their resistance against more work. Now, as more details about the State's automation program became public, making clear the government's desire for more productivity, the postal workers' identification with their work suffered a further blow. Consequently they increasingly relied on their own means — direct management of the shop-floor struggle — to satisfy their needs for less work, more time and more money. In the process they were directly opposing the union, which was basing its demand for the maintenance of the skilled sorter on their ability to work quickly and accurately. During the 1970 strike this conflict between postal workers and the union had for the most part been muted. Two years later, as the automation program turned the weaknesses of the union strategy into an outright failure, this conflict broke into the open.

The Consolidation of Worker's Self-Organization

By the start of the 1972 contract negotiations, the State was proceeding to implement its automation program. Construction had begun on almost all of the "mail-processing factories", and in Ottawa the first automated plant was being tested under "live mail" conditions. Management's choice of Ottawa to initiate the program was based both on the relative lack of militancy of workers there — as compared to postal workers in the larger cities — and also on the very high proportion of government mail, which was already using the new postal code required by the machines. Under these favourable conditions the State planned to iron-out all the "bugs" of the new system, while gaining a foothold against the expected resistance of postal workers in the major financial centers of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. Specifically, the government wanted to test the reaction of the workers to the new machines, set production rates, etc. as well as establish the order in the lowest paid category.

In response to this start-up, the union offered no serious resistance. Despite the lack of agreement over some major issues — notably the wage level of the coder — they refused to call for strike action, and instead told workers to wait for the “proper time”, i.e., the upcoming contract talks. But, having retreated once, the union now entered these negotiations in a very weak position.

The contract expired in March 1972 and over the summer months talks dragged on. The government negotiators, sensing the union’s lack of power, were holding firm on the two major fronts. First, they refused to increase the wage-rate for the coder. Having won a major victory by forcing the union to accept the legitimacy of a separate, lower classification, they were now insisting that the 75¢/hour wage differential established in Ottawa be maintained. Second, they refused to offer more than a 56¢ wage increase over 33 months — a rate of 5.7% per year. To justify this low figure, they simply agreed with the union’s argument that wages are a reward for productive work and then pointed to the actions by an “irresponsible” workforce who had reduced the average output per worker by more than 12.5% since 1965. The union leaders, who had been demanding an annual increase of over 9% with only a two-year contract, found both positions unacceptable. At the same time, however, their strategy in the face of the automation program had placed them on the defensive. Already they had lost the demand for wage parity between coders and clerks, and they now found themselves unable to counter management’s arguments in favour of limiting wage increases. As a result, the union was unable to escalate the pressure on the government by breaking off negotiations and issuing a call for strike action.

As the talks dragged on, the workers held firm the shop-floor struggle. Then in the fall, fed up with the union’s procrastination, the workers initiated on their own a series of wildcat strikes. Through November and December each of the major centers was struck, and in Toronto a court injunction was needed to force a resumption of work. At the same time, these wildcats remained isolated within each city. The union leaders who saw their bargaining position being undermined by these illegal actions refused to coordinate them. Although the “spontaneous” link-up that had occurred in 1965 did not repeat itself, these wildcats were successful in speeding up negotiations.

As a result, on December 18, a conciliation report recommending 18.5% over 33 months was made public. At this point, the weaknesses in the union’s strategy broke through and their leadership collapsed. Not only were they unable to agree on the proposal (six negotiators voted against; four voted to accept), but after this split decision, each negotia-

tor insisted on taking his personal position to the membership. They also postponed the rank and file vote until after the Christmas rush, depriving them of any leverage they might have had. Clearly these officials were not going to gain any more from the government. Thus, even though the proposed wage increase was well below the 7.5% rate of inflation, postal workers had no alternative but to accept the conciliation report.

For postal workers the 1972 contract was a sharp defeat. Embittered at having to bear the costs of the union's failures, they immediately moved to strengthen those daily forms of struggle which escaped the union control. One worker, who developed the practice of increasing his wages by taking money from the mail, put it bluntly: "The fucking union's not doing anything, so you have to look out for yourself". As if to announce this break, workers in Toronto protesting the settlement went on a three-day wildcat late in January 1973, forcing the *union officials* to call in the local police to "maintain order", and to lead a minority of workers across picket lines.

Aside from directly slowing production, or "dogging it", most of the extra-union forms of struggle were borrowed from the unskilled, assembly-line workers. Initially these forms were developed by the mass workers to attack management's use of machines to extract a greater amount of unpaid labour. Subsequently, with the generalization of the mass worker, these forms of struggle have been appropriated by many other groups of workers. At the Post Office, these forms have been picked up primarily by the young workers, whose numbers have increased markedly, and whose insubordination has become a constant in the productivity crisis.

From capital's point of view, the most damaging of these forms was absenteeism, or "calling-in sick". Acting on their needs for more time away from work, postal workers made increasing use of the 15 paid sick days per year, and by 1974 more than 1 worker in 10 was absent each shift. As well as costing millions of dollars in sick-pay, this struggle also took back money from the State by continually forcing management to hire on more workers. A variation of this form is the worker's use of the contract clause allowing them to punch out "sick" two hours early and still get paid for a full shift. In Montreal alone, this practice gained them over a half million dollars in 1973.

Another form of the mass workers' struggle against work — turnover — has reinforced the success of absenteeism. In contrast to the long-term commitment of postal workers in earlier decades, the young mass worker of the 1970's has increasingly refused to spend the rest of his/her life working at the Post Office. Consequently, the quit rate climbed

sharply as over 35% of those hired left within 12 months. In Toronto, turnover hit 46% in 1974 causing Post Office spokesmen to complain of a "critical labour shortage". Needing every worker they could get, management was forced to relax the discipline on the shop-floor. This, of course, only furthered the success of other forms of struggle.

Sabotage was chief among these. The most widespread method of directly interfering with the flow of mail was mis-sorting. Running at an average rate of up to 10%, this figure always jumped anytime management tried to mount a "more work" campaign. Another method of sabotage, which from the workers' point of view was much more lucrative, was theft from the mails. Most simply this was accomplished by pocketing the desired item — particularly cheques and credit cards. A more organized version involved changing the destination of the item by covering the original address label with another one. Using these methods postal workers in Quebec alone seized \$1.5 million in government cheques in 1973, and in Toronto a major bank spokesman claimed "thefts from the mail cost Canadian bankers millions of dollars a year and are the single biggest cause of loss". This practice is not contained to Canada by any means. In London, England, for example, one group of 9 postal workers seized 3/4 million dollars by redirecting packages to specially rented apartments.

For the most part, however, this intensification of the shop-floor struggle was carried on far from the "public eye". Spearheaded by the upfront refusal of the young workers, the struggle by all postal workers for more money for less work — for more power — occurred as part of the daily routine, and as such, was seldom treated as "News". In the process of this "anonymous" struggle, however, the social relations necessary for the larger battles were created. On the one hand, relationships between workers and management became openly antagonistic as each maneuvered to gain an advantage over the other. Where supervisors lacked "neutral" machines to help control the workforce, this relation was particularly sharp as they were forced to directly confront the workers in a manner not unlike "sergeant-majors". On the other hand, relationships between workers were solidified as they moved to support each other by co-operating in their common struggle. Over the last three years, the power contained in this solidarity has been used to postal workers to precipitate numerous, headline-grabbing work stoppages.

In February 1974 in Toronto, for example, the four-hour suspension of a worker following his harassment by a security guard, provoked a two-hour stoppage by 50 workers which took the form of "booking-off sick". Management escalated the struggle by firing a shop-steward and

the workers responded by shutting down the Post Office altogether. The regional union officer was flown in from Ottawa to quell the "unrest" and only 24 hours later the union managed to regain control. Under union orders, the workers were forced back to work, although for over two weeks they carried on a campaign of slowdown and mis-sorting. Incidents such as these contain the seeds of workers' self-organization which made a Montreal wildcat turn into a nation-wide, two week, illegal strike.

The peak of workers' self-organization in the Post Office is found in Montreal. Directly supported by the larger Quebec working class movement, which in May 1972 held the largest general strike in North American history, the struggles of the Montreal postal workers have in turn helped build this power base. This has meant that with respect to other Canadian postal workers, those in Montreal have often taken the lead in rejecting inadequate settlements and in pushing for more advantageous terms. Furthermore, through their daily shop-floor struggles they have been able to take back more from the State while working less. In the words of Andre Ouellet, the previous Postmaster General, they had created the "least productive postal centre in the whole country"¹⁶.

On April 10, 1974, a group of these workers refused to work until a particular supervisor who had been harassing them for over a month was removed. They were suspended on the spot, and when a steward spoke to them in a nearby lunchroom, he was fired on the spot. Angered more than ever, these workers went to each floor of the main terminal encouraging their workmates to stop work and begin an occupation to support their demand: the lifting of all disciplinary actions. Within a couple of hours the occupation was complete as the workers chased the supervisors off the floors and seized control of the "house phones" and the Telex machine. By this time over 300 workers had been suspended, but these reprisals only strengthened their resolve.

Initially the national union council decided not to support the workers' demand since they expected the occupation would soon collapse. To this end, McCall, the president of the "inside" workers' union, negotiated a deal with Ouellet which left many suspensions intact. The workers, however, having learned to rely on themselves in previous struggles, continued their occupation of the Montreal Post Office, despite a court injunction which on April 12 ordered them to vacate the building. In the face of this determination, the Quebec officials realized they were in danger of losing control over the workers and as a result convinced the council to reverse its stand. With his position defeated, McCall was forced to resign. In reaction, the Post-

master General challenged the council by stating publicly that postal workers in the rest of the country would not support the Montreal workers. At this point the national union had no choice but to call for work stoppages. Thus on April 16 postal workers across the country began to stop work by "sitting-in". In contrast to the occupation in Montreal where workers took over the whole building, these union-directed "sit-ins" were confined to the cafeterias. The same day, the Montreal riot police — in full battle dress — entered the Post Office ending the six-day occupation. Following their eviction, over 2000 strikers held a mass meeting, thus demonstrating that, far from being beaten, they were completely determined to win their demand.

Forced by the power of the Montreal workers to call an illegal, nation-wide strike, the union officials wanted to use the strike to re-establish the position they had lost through the 1972 negotiations. No longer basing their power on the ability of the skilled worker to work productively, the union was instead seeking to use the refusal of workers to establish itself as "co-manager" of the automation program. As a result, they raised the demand of wage parity between the postal coder and the postal clerk, and used this demand to rally the support of other postal workers.

Across the country the workers' reaction to the strike call was mixed. Unlike workers in Montreal who had initiated their own occupation, those in other centers were being asked by the union leadership to strike "on command" for two issues — wage parity for the coder, and the reinstatement of the Montreal militants — where their own interests were not clearly defined. As a result they viewed the strike primarily as an *unpaid holiday*. On this basis, the young workers, who were concentrated on the afternoon and night shifts due to the seniority system, generally supported the actions because they gained time away from work. On the other hand, the older workers on the day shifts, who through "dogging it" did the least work in the Post Office, and who often had family responsibilities, generally opposed the "sit-ins" because of the loss in pay. After several days, with half the workers "sitting-in" and the other half working, the union decided to set up picket lines which were grudgingly respected by the day shift workers, thus making the strike 100% effective. When the union wanted to call off the strike it successfully used these workers to lead the return to work. The letter carriers — whose union had also issued a strike call — generally opposed any strike action as they stood to gain little from the strike. The only exception occurred in Vancouver where a joint shop stewards committee demanded an interim wage increase to cover inflation, thus achieving a significant degree of unity between letter carriers and young

and old “inside” workers.

The State, which desperately wanted to enforce the disciplinary actions against the Montreal workers, initially reacted to the nation-wide strike by taking a hard line. It took out full page ads in Canada’s 20 largest daily newspapers which blamed unnamed “elements” for the “unnecessary strike”, and Ouellet threatened to sue the union a half million dollars a day for lost revenue. But, as the illegal strike entered its second week with over 30,000 postal workers still shutting off the flow of its mail, business stepped up its pressure for a return to work — regardless of the terms. Then on April 26 the State capitulated: all disciplinary actions were dropped; no action would be taken against the union; and, a management-union committee was established to resolve the coder issue. By relying on their own power, Montreal postal workers had forced the union to take up their case, and then, with the support of other workers, they had beaten the State into submission. Emerging directly from the shop-floor struggle in Montreal, this confrontation became nation-wide and scored a decisive victory for all workers. Celebrated by a victory march through the streets of Montreal, this success marked a new stage in the struggle between postal workers and the State.

Ocurring at the same time as other important strikes by State workers — especially the illegal strike by 1,400 airport firemen — the April postal strike was an object lesson for workers throughout the country. By disregarding the “established channels” and simply refusing to work until their demands were satisfied, postal workers helped spark a growing strike movement. In 1974 — a light bargaining year — this movement cost capital 9.3 million striker-days, placing Canadian workers second only to Italian workers in time gained through strikes. Fearing a repetition of the April strikes by State workers, the government moved quickly and, in early May, all federal employees received an unprecedented, mid-contract increase of 25¢ an hour. As one postal worker put it: “Sure it’s a bribe, but we earned it!”

Through the militance of the April strike, postal workers also gained a new Postmaster General. Unable to contain the struggle of postal workers, Andre Ouellet found his “promising career” cut short when the State appointed Bryce Mackasey as the fourth Postmaster General since 1965. Describing his new job as “making a good Post Office”, Mackasey and the government were hoping that his reputation as a “friend of labour” would help him to re-establish control at the Post Office.

The April strike also brought to a head the conflict between the letter carriers’ union and the “inside” workers’ union. Since 1967 they had co-operated through the Council of Postal Unions — a bureaucratic link at

the top. Although there had often been tension between the two unions, until 1974 this arrangement proved adequate. Then, as the militancy of postal workers developed it became clear that each union would have to address more specifically the workers' grievances if its control was to be maintained. During the April strike, the letter carriers, who were only indirectly affected by automation, had strongly objected to being called out simply to support the "inside workers". Thus in the summer of 1974 the Council of Postal Unions was formally dissolved.

The April strike also forced major changes in the structure of the "inside" workers' union. First, officials from Quebec moved into several positions of national importance, and Jean-Claude Parrot — the national vice-president — became the editor of the union newspaper. This change, which was based on the strength of Quebec postal workers, coincided with *the consolidation of the union as the "co-manager" of the automation program*. With the president on record as stating that "only a fool would try to stop progress",¹⁷ the union has clearly affirmed its acceptance of the State's use of automation to impose a tighter link between wages and productivity. For example, while the union did gain wage parity for the postal coders, in exchange it abandoned its long-standing rejection of management's right to impose production quotas. No longer holding the sectoral defense of the skilled worker as its first priority, the union is now striving to obtain some direct control over the implementation of the automation program under the slogan "all postal workers must share in the benefits of automation". In the wake of the April strike the union-management "Manpower Committee", which had been established in 1972, met for the first time allowing the union to play a consultative role. More recently, the union has mounted a strong propaganda campaign aimed at acquiring the legal power to negotiate all aspects of technological change and has been singing the praises of "workers' control" in its publications. This stance on the part of the union is presently being echoed by the Postmaster General, who has stated that postal workers will have "the maximum degree of industrial democracy" and "a greater voice in their productivity"¹⁸. Intending to keep the government to its pronouncements, the union has made clear that it will make full use of workers' insubordination to gain leverage with the State — it has already called on workers not to sort mail bearing the new postal code — in order to ensure for itself the position of "co-manager" of the automation program.

Finally, and most importantly, the April strike strengthened the workers' daily struggle on the shop-floor. The almost total lack of identification of postal workers with their work was demonstrated during the April strike when they sang: "Hail, hail, the mail's in there,

what the hell do we care..." Having forced the State to retreat from its disciplinary actions, workers stepped up their extra-union forms of struggle to circumvent the union's maneuvers aimed at restoring discipline on the shop-floor, as a result, the Post Office deficit for 1974 jumped to \$177.2 million.

Both the government and the union know that *this increasing refusal by postal workers has thrown into question the success of the automation program*. Undoubtedly capital still plans to automate. As Mackasey said late last year: "We have to automate We have to handle increasing volumes of mail efficiently It is imperative that the Post Office function"¹⁹. But the weaknesses of the automation program as a solution to the long-term productivity crisis are becoming more compelling every day.

In small centers such as Ottawa, Winnipeg, and Calgary the route to automation is proving "frustrating and disappointing". Officials are grim enough to refer to it as a "failure" but insist it is not a "disaster"²⁰. Absenteeism, turnover, and sabotage — weapons that postal workers have used with growing facility — are now proving their effectiveness against machine-imposed work. In Calgary, for example, the machines "are breaking down frequently" and the new processing plant is "under-staffed". Blaming a high turnover — one group of 25 young workers hired last spring as permanent employees all quit in the fall — the local postmaster has been forced to concede that mail service has gone downhill since the new plant opened²¹.

A spectacular indication of how the automation program is already a few steps behind the present level of workers' insubordination occurred in Toronto recently. At about 5:00 AM on Nov. 26, 1974, after most of the mail for the city had been cleared, a fire broke out in the main Terminal. No one was injured and no unemployment or other social assistance cheques were lost, but before it was put out, the blaze had destroyed half the main Terminal causing over \$1.5 million damage. One worker from another part of the building, who stopped work when smoke was sucked through the ventilation system, described the reaction of most employees this way: "We were standing there watching the firemen fight the fire — and we were all cheering for the fire!" Although the cause of the fire was officially "undetermined", the workers benefited in a number of ways. First, they did much less work than usual for full pay, while management scurried around organizing temporary facilities. Secondly, since these makeshift quarters lacked the regular control mechanisms, "dogging it" in these areas jumped enormously. Thirdly, over 2500 extra jobs were created for a period of time, thus spreading the work thinner.

The inadequacy of the automation program has also been demonstrated in Montreal where management won't have the help of machines for at least two years. Attacked by inflation rates above 11%, these postal workers have slowed production to the point where management has been forced to give "blanket overtime" for the past 12 months — 26 extra hours a week (18 of them at double time) *if the workers want*. And, as one worker boasted: "We now do less work in 10 hours than we used to do in 8". At the same time, postal workers across the country have strengthened their wage demands. In the current contract talks they have forced the union to adopt a program calling for a 71% wage increase, 40 hours pay for 30 hours work, \$1.50 premium for afternoon and night shifts, among other benefits.

Faced with the failure of the automation program to re-establish control over the workforce, the State is now moving to directly repress the postal workers' struggle. Under the cover of a generalized attack on workplace struggles — legal actions against strikers; State imposed settlements; State trusteeship of unions, etc. — the State has picked out postal workers for special treatment because of their leading role. In March, Mackasey threatened in the House of Commons "to close the Montreal Post Office for several months to purge the militants and slackers ... to clean out of the Post Office all those elements who draw money and are not doing an honest day's work"²². Then in April, after claiming that "the sons of bitches just won't work" he ordered the "indefinite suspension" of 39 militants²³.

This shift away from merely re-organizing the work process to the use of direct force is a decisive new turn in the State's strategy against workers' insubordination. It signals the growing consolidation of a new level of workers' struggle in the State sector — a struggle not against this or that work process, but a struggle for liberation from work itself.

May, 1975

FOOTNOTES

1. Jamieson, S. M., *TIMES OF TROUBLE: LABOUR UNREST AND INDUSTRIAL CONFLICT IN CANADA, 1900-1966*, Task Force on Labour Relations, Ottawa, 1968, p. 395-396.
2. Quoted in Jamieson, S. M., *op. cit.* p. 423.
3. *THE GLOBE & MAIL*, Toronto, May 1974.
4. Maxwell, J., ed., *RESTRUCTURING THE INCENTIVE SYSTEM*, C. D. Howe Research Institute, Montreal, 1974, p. 157.
5. Maxwell, J., *op. cit.* p. 69.
6. For a discussion of this "new class of worker" and their affect on unemployment patterns, see B. Goldman, "The Changing Nature of Unemployment in Canada" in Maxwell, J., *op. cit.* p. 59-102.
7. From a speech delivered by the Postmaster General to the Vancouver Board of Trade in April, 1972. Quoted in "Workers' Struggles in Advance Capitalism: The Post Office", *THE NEWSLETTER*, #3, Toronto, 1973, p. 45.

8. A BLUEPRINT FOR CHANGE: CANADA POST OFFICE, November 1969, prepared by the consulting firm of Kates, Peat, Marwick & Co. p. 1.
9. op. cit. p. 1-10.
10. op. cit. p. 23-24.
11. op. cit. p. 133.
12. Marx, CAPITAL, Vol I, Chapter XV, Section 5
13. This expression is first used by A. Negri, in OPERAI E STATO, ed. S. Bologna and A. Negri, Feltrinelli editore, Milan, 1972. Quoted in a review by B. Ramirez in TELOS, #13, Fall 1972. p. 140-147.
14. A BLUEPRINT FOR CHANGE: CANADA POST OFFICE, loc. cit. p. 127.
15. Quoted in "Workers' Struggle in Advanced Capitalism: The Post Office", THE NEWSLETTER, #3, p. 49.
16. Quoted in "The April Postal Strike: Workers, Union and the State, THE NEWSLETTER, #5, Toronto, 1974, p. 27.
17. THE GLOBE & MAIL, Toronto, April 2, 1975.
18. From a speech delivered by the Postmaster General to the Canadian Direct Mailing Association in Toronto, May, 1975. Quoted in THE GLOBE & MAIL, May 15, 1975.
19. Interview published in THE TORONTO STAR, Nov. 12, 1974.
20. FINANCIAL POST, Toronto, Jan. 18, 1975.
21. THE GLOBE & MAIL, Sept. 26, 1974.
22. THE TORONTO STAR, March 14, 1975.
23. THE TORONTO STAR, April 15, 1975.