

NEGOTIATIONS AT CRITICAL STAGE



As this magazine goes to press, collective bargaining over the terms of the 2011 National Agreement has reached a critical stage.

Representatives of the NPMHU and the Postal Service started bargaining on August 30, 2011. As usual, bargaining picked up speed during the fall, with the last few weeks prior to the November 20 contract expiration date particularly intense. Negotiators actually were locked away in a downtown, Washington, DC hotel for the final week. Nonetheless, the parties determined—as is often the case—that it would be helpful to extend the National Agreement for a few weeks in order to determine whether the parties could reach a tentative agreement. The first extension took the parties to December 7, and additional extensions are possible.

It is no secret that the Postal Service is facing a difficult financial situation. Perhaps surprisingly, the parties even

agree on the primary causes of those financial difficulties, which include, first and foremost, unjustified prefunding of retiree health insurance and unwarranted overfunding of federal retirement programs, and second, a greater than expected drop in first-class mail volume. On the benefit issues, Congress has created these problems, and Congress needs to fix them. On the question of mail volume, the Union and management have different views on how to deal with the financial and operational impact of lost volume, with the USPS unfortunately focused on cutting postal plants, retail offices, days of delivery, and guaranteed service standards, thereby reducing overall service to the American mailing public.

With this backdrop, both parties understood that negotiations would be both difficult and complicated. And the inevitable has become the actual. The complex questions raised by these circumstances should be fairly evident.

For example, what job protections for employees are justified when the Postal Service may have to downsize its workforce? Likewise, what wage increases, to maintain an employee's standard of living, are reasonable when the Postal Service is facing financial deficits and issues of liquidity? The examples could continue, but there is no reason to belabor the obvious. Difficult financial circumstances beget difficult rounds of collective bargaining.

Fortunately, the NPMHU and the Postal Service have been able to discuss these issues in a professional manner. Although this round of bargaining began with some hostility, because management issued “white papers” announcing its desire to eliminate the no-layoff clause and to terminate its participation in federal retirement and health insurance programs, the negotiators have tried to approach bargaining as a process to find rational solutions to unreasonable circumstances.

As stated previously, the NPMHU has been seeking a negotiated agreement that is both protective and constructive. The agreement must protect career Mail Handlers who have dedicated their lives to the Postal Service, and it should protect the Postal Service against those who seek its demise. It also should contain practical solutions to some of the problems faced by the parties, so that the Postal Service and all mail handlers can continue to provide the American mailing public with the service that they have come to expect.

The bargaining process has operated through a series of off-the-record subcommittee meetings, on-the-record bargaining