

MEASURING SUCCESS

BY JOHN GIBSON, VICE PRESIDENT,
EASTERN REGION



As we approach the conclusion of yet another round of negotiations between the National Postal Mail Handlers Union and the U.S. Postal Service, it would seem appropriate to examine the metrics of success. How do we evaluate the process of collective bargaining with our only Employer, the Postal Service, with a clear and objective eye and without the murk and the muck that sometimes can result from complicated bargaining over complex issues between two experienced bargaining representatives.

Dare it be said, but often the personal agendas of individual union leaders or the politics of ambition can skew what is obvious accomplishment into what can be described as failure. Defining success in the context of collective bargaining, or more broadly under the abstract definition of representation, is not easy to be sure. Nonetheless, notwithstanding the “murk and the muck” that might attach to any postmortem on collective bargaining, a thoughtful evaluation through the lens of an honest critique is to be embraced. After all, we really want it all, we want everything we deserve, and we want it now. This is understood. This is what we fight for.

Obtaining everything that we or our Union want in bargaining just because we ask for it, however, is a most naïve approach. In the real world, many of the most important gains in collective

bargaining, those that are at the very core of it all, are incremental and achieved over time. Having said all that, the NPMHU welcomes the challenge of an elevated critique as we review the achievements of this Union over the last two contracts, and over the next one expected to be announced soon.

The first and most obvious element of National bargaining are wage improvements. It easily could be argued that wages, Brothers and Sisters, are why we took the job in the first place, and while many of us have encountered a lot of really great people in our time with the Service, if we are being honest, most of us didn't sign up for the stimulating discussion, although there is plenty of that, both good and bad. Rather, the basic deal between workers and management is that wages and other forms of compensation and benefits, current and deferred, are fair and reasonable.

The jury is still out on the next National Agreement, and a contract is not finally settled until the members of this great Union say so in a ratification vote, but all indications are that progress has yet again been made by this National Union. Again, the final contract is not settled until the National parties come to an agreement on all of its terms and we all get to vote on its acceptance or rejection.

Although we do not know for certain what will come next in the 2022

National Agreement, we do know what we were able to obtain in the first two contracts negotiated by the current administration. The last two negotiated National Agreements covering the six-year, four-month period between May 2016 and September 2022 increased base wages by 7.7% for Full-Time Regular Mail Handlers and by more than 17% for Mail Handler Assistants. (MHAs received an additional 1% per contractual increase to make up for no cost-of-living-adjustments (COLAs) and an extra \$.50 per hour in the 2016 contract). In addition, all career Mail Handlers received their share of 13 separate COLAs also negotiated into these two National Agreements. The annualized dollar increases, from the beginning of the 2016 National Agreement until now, for those hired prior to February 2013 amount to a Level 4 first-step increase of \$11,785 or a jump of about 33%, and a Level 4 top step increase of \$13,410 or a jump of about 24%. For a Level 5 first-step employee, the increase is \$11,908 or about a 32% jump, and for top-step Level 5 an increase of \$13,494 or about a 24% jump. For those hired after February 2013, the first-step Level 4 increase of \$7,706 was about a 24% jump and the top-step Level 4 increase of \$13,410 or a jump of about 24%. Level 5 first-step under this scale has increased by \$7,822 or a jump of about 23%, and for top step an increase of \$13,494 or jump of about 24%.



Yes, that's a lot of numbers, but when you're talking about thousands of dollars in increases with percentages all above 20%-30% over a six-year stretch, that sure sounds like measurable success. It should also be noted that these are base pay increases only, and that the annualized dollar increases described above do not include any overtime or Sunday premium hours, which can be added to the success story. It also bears mention that an increase in night shift differential also was successfully negotiated in our last round of bargaining. A somewhat overlooked component of wages that has remained static for multiple rounds of bargaining is now revived by this administration opening the door to further incentivize those who are tasked with performing work between 6:00 pm and 6:00 am.

There are many more elements that constitute significant success, including a no-layoff provision for career Mail Handlers that has been carried over from contract to contract. This is something that is largely unappreciated, and only comes into clear view during economic recessions when employees in other industries are getting laid off. Yes, you can get fired for cause in the Postal Service, but you cannot be laid off.

Improvements in the protections offered by Article 12 when duty assignments are abolished also occurred during the last round of bargaining. These provisions enhance the value

of seniority and standing in the workplace in more situations now than ever before. This is also an incremental improvement in the terms of our relationship with the employer, strengthening the rights we already enjoy in the workplace.

For Mail Handlers Assistants on a path to career, the last two contracts have seen improvements in holiday pay, overtime pay, scheduling, and other contractual provisions that continue to improve their economic standing and quality of life. Inarguably however, the most important achievement for career path Mail Handler Assistants under the current National leadership, without any doubt, is the Filling of Residuals Memorandum of Understanding. This agreement requires the filling of three out of every four residual vacancies with the conversion to career status of an MHA. An obviously life-changing event for these employees. Since its inception this single agreement has accounted for the conversion to career status of tens of thousands of employees. In addition to this incredible advancement, over the last eighteen months another series of negotiated agreements has resulted in the conversion to career of more than an additional fifteen thousand Mail Handler Assistants. This we can measure, and for me it equals success.

This is not to say or even to suggest that the Union's work is done. Indeed,

the work of the National Union in collective bargaining is really never finished; likewise, the work of the Union at the Local level, primarily to maintain and enforce the gains that the Union makes in national bargaining, also is never complete.

The important work of improving wages, benefits, and working conditions, of digging in and advancing the interests of those we represent, achieved by the National arm of this great Union is only one aspect of the substance of this National Postal Mail Handlers Union. We cannot overlook the day-to-day defense of this good work by those, literally, on the front lines. Those elected and appointed representatives from each of the thirty-six Locals, whose daily toil against those in management who would deny and render meaningless those National and Local level achievements cannot be overstated. When it comes to measuring the success of this Union top to bottom, the act of defending against the management affronts that never cease, the fierce advocacy of what we have, what we truly deserve, and what we aim to keep as Mail Handlers and employees of the United States Postal Service is the heart and soul of this success story. The ability and the undeniable will to fight for and defend earned rights is truly the final measure of success of this great Union.