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For Our Children: Childcare Concerns Link Postal Workers Across the Racial Divide in San Francisco

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For Our Children: Childcare Concerns Link Postal Workers Across the Racial Divide in San Francisco

Abstract

[Excerpt] "Celebrating diversity" – it's the latest trend for justice-minded union and community activists. Management, too, is interested in diversity: note the steady stream of articles, books, and seminars for business executives on the subject. Even President Clinton stated his desire to create an administration that "looks like America."

Listening to a union activist share her experiences of 20 years in the U.S. Postal Service is a good way to bring a dose of realism to the diversity hype. Karen Wing, a Chinese-American woman who is a shop steward and clerk in the San Francisco General Mail Facility, knows how very hard it is to build understanding and lasting unity among different nationalities.

"More than anything else, unions and activists trying to implement diversity programs need to emphasize patience and perseverance," Wing says. This is especially true on the shop floor, where workers may not have the full power of the international or local union structures behind them. The question Wing faced in her local was "How do you organize in a diverse workplace when you are essentially 'on your own?'"

The problems are enormous. As a shop steward, people often come to Wing with their complaints. Some pro-union black workers ask, "Why don't those Asians speak English? Are they talking about me? Look how they play up to management, they don't even care about the union." On the other hand, some Asian immigrant workers ask Wing, "How can you work in the union? I can't be a shop steward – my English isn't good enough. And those black people are always complaining about work."

Handling remarks like these is not easy. How do you fight a management that deliberately stirs up racial antagonisms? How do you build a union responsive to a diverse workforce?

For Wing, meeting these challenges on the shop floor begins with knowing the history and changes occurring within the workplace.

Keywords

racism, unionism, labor movement, San Francisco, worker rights, organizing, postal workers



For Our Children

Childcare concerns link postal workers across the racial divide in San Francisco

■ *Debbie Moy*

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WORKPLACE TENSIONS = RACIAL TENSIONS

Because San Francisco is one of the fastest changing regions in the United States, the General Mail Facility's workforce has undergone tremendous demographic shifts in the past 10 years. When Wing started to work there in 1973, the shop floor was about 45% black, 45% white, and 10% Asian and other nationalities.

This mix reflected the World War II era. Black women in particular had their first chance for government jobs during the war. Post-war veterans, both white and black, moved into civilian government service at the Post Office. The workforce was racially divided by "craft" lines: for example, motor vehicle and maintenance tended to have more black workers, whereas the clerks had a more diverse population.

The local Postal Service in 1973 did not, however, reflect San Francisco which has one of the largest Asian populations in the U.S. Until the mid-1970s, only U.S. citizens could work in federal civil service jobs like the Postal Service. It wasn't until 1978 that immigrant Asians began coming into the San Francisco Postal Service in large numbers. Similarly, Hispanics were rarely employed until a 1982 lawsuit forced the Postal Service to begin targeted hiring.

On the shop floor today, the workforce is roughly 60% Asian, 15% Black, 15% Hispanic, and 10% white. Within certain crafts such as clerks, the percentage is as high as 70% Asian.

Race relations are not just a matter of "black vs white" or "white vs Asian," Wing points out. There are also hostilities between Asian groups (e.g., China-born and Taiwan-born Chinese, Filipinos from different areas of the Philippines, Southeast Asians); Hispanic

groups (e.g. Salvadoran, Nicaraguan, Mexican); and between American-born and immigrants from all of the countries.

Just at this level, race relations is an enormously complicated problem at the Postal Service. But to make matters worse, Postal Service operations are rapidly changing. Mechanization of jobs, as well as contracting out, have reduced the number of permanent "career" positions. Hiring practices worsen racial antagonisms. The last group of San Francisco "career" employees, mostly Asian immigrants, were hired two to three years ago. In 1992, the Postal Service began hiring "transitional employees." These workers, many of whom are black, are given only temporary jobs for a few years until the new machines are phased in. They have only limited benefits and cannot even file a grievance for just cause. Add the labor-intensive, assembly-line work and military style management of the Postal Service, and you have a pressure cooker of race relations every day.

Under these conditions, relations between the races may never change significantly. Still, Wing believes that workers can at least try to create a general work situation where everyone gets along, although not necessarily like each other. People can learn to be respectful and open to different cultures, history, and languages.

"As an activist, I try to think beyond one-time events," says Wing. "I try to look at ways to affect people every day, in their working situations. At times, it comes down to basic things: Who do you eat lunch with? How do you all work together on the same machine? How do you build common ground between people speaking many different languages?"

The common ground Wing discovered emerged from a "survival technique as a new union officer" and turned into a powerful way for different nationalities to build understanding. The common ground was women.

UNITY THROUGH SISTERHOOD

In 1980, Wing ran for union office in the local American Postal Workers Union (APWU) and became the only Asian woman on an executive board composed of mainly African-American men. "The first few months were awful," she remembers. "I got tired of being treated like a 'girlfriend' very quickly. In self-defense more than anything else, I wanted to get more women involved."

Fortunately for Wing and other female postal workers, they had POWER on their side. POWER, or Post Office Women for Equal Rights, is a national independent caucus of women in the APWU. In 1983, a group of women within POWER decided to target the



childcare concerns of its members. Postal workers had a real challenge in finding childcare flexible and affordable enough to match their schedule and salary, Wing explains. In many cases, both husband and wife worked at the Postal Service; there were also many women and men who were single parents.

"We made a conscious effort to include as many different nationalities as possible," explains Wing. In doing outreach, it was important "to draw in people who had never worked with the union, as well as the shop stewards and activists. None of us had ever worked together as a group before, but the issue gave us a way to get to know each other."

In 1984 postal workers at the 24-hour mail facility were surveyed on their childcare needs. The committee members recruited friends, set up tables, and got the word out on the shop floor. "We were effective because the committee was a good mix of people who were respected on the shop floor," Wing says. "The union also got a lot of good publicity." The results of the survey showed a clear need for childcare, either on-site or close by the General Mail Facility (see box).

Between the range of work schedules and the racial and ethnic tensions among workers, members of the newly-formed San Francisco General Mail Facility Childcare Project had their work cut out for them. The group now included not only members of APWU, but also members of the Mailhandlers (NMHU) and Letter Carriers (NALC) unions. The Project also reached out into the community to interested parents and friends of postal workers, ethnic clubs, women's organizations and the Children's Council, a childcare referral, technical assistance, and advocacy agency in

San Francisco.

In generating enthusiasm and pressure on the shop floor and in the community the Childcare Project did everything from providing options of childcare availability in the area to holding button campaigns, a logo contest, a contest of children's art which would be produced in a calendar, and a children's fashion show. They also met with management over the issue, investigated other workplaces and unions that had won childcare benefits, and participated in Affirmative Action programs. "We just kept plugging away," Wing recalls, "and we found that through all these activities, we grew closer."

Support came from the national level too. Four members of the Project attended the 1985 POWER conference and won a resolution supporting the project and pressing for childcare as a high priority in the 1987 National Contract Negotiations.

Finally, in 1989, the Project worked out arrangements with a nearby childcare facility to expand the center to a 24-hour week-day facility, providing childcare slots for postal workers' children. At the time, it was only the second APWU local in the entire country to provide such benefits.

Throughout the life of the Project, the focus remained on the goals—not the individual differences, Wing points out. Understanding that many women were not used to meetings, the committee agreed on ground rules such as coming on time, listening to everyone speak, setting agendas, and ending on time. Committee members struggled through the growing pains—providing rides and food, allowing kids at meetings, planning a wide range of activities—to make sure that each person could participate in her or his own way.

Wing came to appreciate the perspectives of the various nationalities and especially the difficulties in building understanding. "For both blacks and Asians, maybe an American-born Chinese like myself was a little less threatening. Since I spoke English, blacks weren't as uptight around me as they were around Asians who spoke other languages. And although the immigrants were often frustrated with my inability to speak Chinese, at least I was also Chinese and had some understanding of their experiences in the U.S."

"This was an exciting time for me personally," she adds. "As a union officer, I helped provide a way for women to be involved in their union. And as a woman, it was much easier to be a union activist if there were a lot of other women around."

The childcare committee is not active presently, but the camaraderie among members remains. Some people are looking to

extend the committee's activities to include inter-generational care (elder/child care). They're also considering a program where postal retirees could become trained as child care workers at the community college.

ASSESSING THE IMPACT

How much did the childcare committee work carry over into the overall race relations on the shop floor? "Well, I'm sure people appreciated what we did, and although we probably could have tried more visible group activities, we definitely laid the basis for future work," says Wing.

It's also hard when the local itself is not united on a common approach to recruiting and uniting the membership. To get the maximum benefit out of campaigns like this one would take an all-out effort. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Support from the International union can make a difference in local issues of workplace diversity, but the majority of APWU locals don't have diversity issues as complex as San Francisco. Taking on the kinds of challenges presented at the facility would take tremendous resources and commitment.

The International did provide important support at two national conferences for deaf postal workers in 1991. The effort was successful, in part, because the deaf culture, though ethnically diverse, is relatively homogenous and the group itself is not large. Wing, who helped organize the West Coast conference observes that as a result of the conference, deaf postal workers feel they finally have a place in the union and the Postal Service. There's also much greater respect among everyone for the struggles deaf workers go through just to live and work at the Post Office.

CONCLUSION

Wing's experiences show that finding common ground is just not that easy in a workforce and a workplace as diverse and complicated as the San Francisco General Mail Facility. At this point it's been more effective to bring people together around issues that are not traditional contract issues, such as childcare.

By giving people a chance to get to know and respect each other in non-threatening situations, unionists can create a small model of how a very diverse group of people can work and live together. That lays the basis for taking on the harder issues we face on the job and in society. ■