

Are Post-Office Employees Human Beings?

AN AMERICAN BOY went to work one day in the United States Post-office. He was wide-awake and ambitious, and so he chose the biggest business and the biggest employer in the country. Step by step, he rose to be supervisor, and then superintendent of an important department. He made a record of "supreme industry, faithfulness, and loyalty." Age came on, but his zeal did not diminish. Postal officials pointed to him with pride and said he upheld "the very highest traditions of the service," and was "ever ready to sacrifice his personal interests for the public good." Seventy years without a break he served his big employer, the American people, a shining example for all who would hear that crowning tribute—"well done, good and faithful servant!" Last winter, at his post of duty, he was stricken with a chill. Pneumonia followed. Even then he begged that he might dress and return to his duties. And his big employer—the American people—what generous provision and tender care did it give to this oldest employee who had always "sacrificed his personal interest for the public"? The man had not yet taken his annual vacation of fifteen days. His absence now from his post of duty was charged against his vacation. In fifteen days all his "vacation" was gone and his salary stopt. For three days, as he lay on his death-bed, his pay was deducted. Then death came, and he went to receive the "well done" from One whose words are backed with eternal reward. But on earth, where he had toiled so long, the praise given him was empty. No allowance for sickness; no allowance for burial; nothing for his family; his meager salary docked after seventy years of faithful service. What an employer!

You can hardly believe it? You think it must have been an accident, quite unusual in the service of the United States Post-office? You say such a thing could not be tolerated by the American people? It is not unusual, except for the man's extreme age. It is tolerated by the American people—by you and by us—to our shame. Our postal laws, until we change them, treat all employees, high and low, letter-carrier, porter, clerk and superintendent, in the most niggardly way. They work night and day, often in unwholesome quarters and under severe strain. Their minds are crowded with the endless details of an exacting system. Their bodies are racked and worn by harsh conditions and cruel burdens, and they are the lowest-paid free workers in the United States. It is time for us all to know the facts and to see that quick justice is done.

Congress has been looking into these facts, but Congress is not the "big employer" against whom the prophet Malachi thunders when he threatens swift judgment for "those that oppress the hireling in his wages." The bitter protests poured out to the Committee of Congress must ring in our ears and rouse us to action. Crowding the experience of thousands into a single sentence, a letter-carrier from Camden, N. J., exclaimed: "If you men really knew the want, and, distress, and sorrow, and trouble that reach into the life of the poor letter-carrier, you would be up at night trying to find a remedy."

From every city and village of this great rich country and from every branch of the postal service have come these protests and appeals for fair play: "We are not able to provide our families with the necessities of life." . . . "Our wives and our children have to go to work in order to exist." . . . "If you compel men to be ill-fed and under-nourished because of insufficient salary, it will have a far-reaching effect on the coming generation." . . . "We bought Liberty Bonds to help the Government and had to sell them at a loss to buy food."

Can we hear such things from the men who are working for us and not tingle with shame and indignation? Can we rest easily and take our own pleasure and comfort until we have first done all in our power for quick relief?

Consider the kind of man our post-office demands as clerk. His work is highly specialized and complex; he must be skilled by long and intensive training and study, memorizing thousands of facts, intricate systems of classifications, and many methods used in banking, insurance, and commercial business. He must be familiar with the postal laws and regulations filling a volume of 1,700 sections. All this study and preparation must be in his own time and at his own expense. And when he stands in his hard-earned place, a full-equipped postal expert in the employ of the American people, he is paid less than the common unskilled day-laborer on the streets. One of these experts who, after twenty-four years of postal service, had acquired special knowledge and experience invaluable to the Government, testified, "I could go out as a milk-wagon driver and get \$50 a week, yet the Government pays me an average of about \$4 a day." The steadfast loyalty of such a man through long years of pinching penury may be a splendid example of American patriotism, but not one of us can claim a like virtue if we fail to raise our voice against the continuance of such shameful parsimony.

But that isn't all. These meager salaries are constantly shrinking throughout the year. Any absence for sickness or other causes is penalized by forfeiture of pay. If death occurs in the family of the employee, whether wife, child, or parent, not a day nor an hour of absence with pay is allowed. Even the solemn hours of funeral rites can be taken only at the expense of the employee.

Letter-carriers are converted into pack-animals and loaded down with burdens often weighing sixty to eighty pounds or more. Through driving rain or blizzard, in burning heat or stinging cold, they must cover their routes on schedule time. The stoutest often succumb to the inhuman strain; yet the highest salary they can earn, after years of smaller pay, is less than \$32 a week.

New York is the biggest post-office in the world. It does the biggest business and turns in millions of dollars profit. It is one of the most highly specialized and responsible organizations in modern industry, the center of innumerable activities on which the progress and prosperity of the entire nation depend. Its banking and financial transactions last year alone totaled more than \$672,000,000. The management of this vast business concern, with its great central office covering two city

blocks, its fifty branch offices, its 250 substations, and fourteen thousand employees, requires supreme managerial abilities on the part of its department chiefs. They would be receiving salaries of \$25,000 to \$75,000 for such official services in big commercial organizations. Yet the highest salary paid to the "big four" superintendents at the head of the four main departments of the great New York post-office is only \$3,360 a year, or less than \$65 a week, and not one of these men attained his position in less than twenty-seven years' service. The superintendents of the great railway terminal postal stations receive less than \$46 to \$56 a week after serving an average of thirty-five years each! And we pay more than that to longshoremen and window-cleaners and drivers of milk-wagons!

We are doing more than this act of cruel injustice to the 280,000 postal employees of the country. We are bringing a serious menace to our own interests. The postal service is being crippled by wholesale resignations. It is becoming impossible to induce competent men or women to fill the vacancies. In the New York post-office alone nearly eight hundred resignations have occurred within five months. False economy is destroying all efficiency and threatening a collapse of the service. Time and energy that ought to be given to handling the mail is diverted to instructing and managing a shifting, dissatisfied organization. The same thing is true in all parts of the country. Our indifference and neglect as the "big employer" of the post-office workers is recoiling on our own heads.

THE LITERARY DIGEST has made thorough investigation of the facts and is making this brief, urgent statement to its more than two million readers because many times they have responded nobly to appeals for worthy action as Americans, and now is a time for such action. Congress is not to blame for the existing conditions. The men now sitting in the Capitol at Washington are human beings like the rest of us. They have warm hearts and ready sympathy and as keen a sense of justice as any American citizen can have. The blame and the shame for this pitiful injustice to the nation's postal employes are ours as a people. It is yours who read this page. It is ours who write and publish it. The change of policy from a brutal stinginess or careless indifference to a fair and liberal American policy must be wrought by us, the Americans who always love fair play.

Write to your Congressman and to both of your Senators, every one of you men and women who has a heart and an active sense of human justice. Don't put it off; the time before Congress will adjourn is short. Urge them to give their most ardent support to the bill putting into immediate effect a substantial increase of salaries throughout the entire postal service of the United States. Congress will gladly and quickly pass this bill when the American people rally to its support. If you don't know the names of the Senators and Congressman ask your letter-carrier, or postmaster, or banker. Let all business houses be heard from, and all civic societies and fraternal orders. Rescue these postal toilers from penury and narrow lives and set them on their feet as American citizens who need not suffer nor be ashamed in their service of us all.

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