



A global voice for postal workers

For nearly a century, decisions about how postal services around the world interact have been made by an international body consisting of the government agencies that control the flow of mail. Now, for the first time, workers who deliver the mail have a seat at the table when choices are made and global rules are written that can affect their lives.

The change is the result of a memorandum of understanding between the government group—the Universal Postal Union, a United Nations agency—and Union Network International, the worldwide alliance of postal and communications workers that includes the National Association of Letter Carriers. Because private delivery companies have increasingly sought to influence the UPU, it is important that workers in government post offices have a forum to promote their interests.

The United States Postal Service is just one of 190 postal operators represented in the UPU, which is based in Berne, Switzerland and coordinates the multi-billion dollar international mail system. Together, these operators employ some six million workers and annually deliver 420 billion pieces of mail (letters, journals and packages) through a global network of 700,000 post offices. For nearly 100 years, the UPU has provided national post offices a forum to discuss and improve universal mail delivery services.

Over the same period of time, the three million postal workers who are organized by unions have developed their own global forum to share information and to act collectively in support of one another. That forum, Union Network International (UNI), was established in 1911 as the Postal, Telegraph and Telephone International. It changed its name in 2000 when it merged with other globally-organized service sector workers in recognition of globalization and technological convergence in the postal, commerce, financial and graphical industries. In addition to the NALC, the APWU (Postal Workers) and NPMHU (Mail Handlers) also belong to UNI.

Following months of painstaking discussions, UNI and UPU signed an MOU on November 8, 2005 that commits both parties to cooperate and promote a “social dialogue” between postal operators and their employees with the goal of ensuring sustainable development of postal services at the international level. UNI General Secretary Philip Jennings and current UPU Director General Edouard Dayan signed the agreement.

The MOU grows out of a change in the structure of the Universal Postal Union at the 2004 UPU Congress in Romania. That Congress created a Consultative Committee to represent the interests of postal industry stakeholders (workers, mailers, competitors, etc.) in UPU activities. UNI is the designated representative of postal workers on the committee.

NALC played an important role in this development. In 1997, then-NALC President Vincent Sombrotto urged Thomas Leavey, a former USPS executive who was Director General of the UPU at the time, to open a dialogue with PTTI, as the NALC’s international trade union federation was then named. Sombrotto recognized that the postal industry had long been a global enterprise, that private couriers like UPS and FedEx were increasingly active in the UPU, and that postal workers had interests in UPU’s interactions with the World Trade Organization and the World Bank. Leavey followed the NALC’s advice and led the charge to create the Consultative Committee in Bucharest seven years later.

NALC President William H. Young lauded the landmark UNI-UPU agreement: “Postal workers are the heart and soul of the global postal industry and they deserve a seat at the table when governments make decisions how postal services should be operated and regulated. UNI’s role with the UPU and the new MOU provides postal workers in the United States and elsewhere a voice in the future of postal services.” ☒