

INTENSIFIED WORK, INTENSIFIED STRUGGLE

INTENSIFIED WORK, INTENSIFIED STRUGGLE:
SOLIDARITY UNIONISM AND THE EDMONTON POSTAL
WORKERS' FIGHT AGAINST FORCED OVERTIME

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ABSTRACT

In February 2011, a wave of creative direct action swept across postal depots in the city of Edmonton which saw rank-and-file workers organizing outside of the channels of formal-legal unionism. Fighting against management's imposition of compulsory overtime as a staffing measure, Letter Carriers and other "outside" postal workers relied on solidarity and resistance at the point of production in a successful campaign to put an end to this practice. The relevance of this particular struggle to the Canadian labour movement is twofold. First, the intensified workloads of Edmonton postal workers reflect a wider shift in the nature of employment relationships away from the existence of employer support as part of the rise of neoliberal capitalism. Second, the choice of workers to organize at a distance from the historically militant Canadian Union of Postal Workers reveals both the predicament facing labour of a highly restrictive formal labour relations system as well as an alternative path of resistance. For Edmonton postal workers, this path was forged in large part as a result of the influence of IWW dual-carder organizers and, more specifically, their introduction of a mode of union praxis known as solidarity unionism

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER I	4
CHAPTER II	24
CHAPTER III	40
CHAPTER IV	69
CHAPTER V	88
CONCLUSION	128
APPENDIX – METHODOLOGY	132
BIBLIOGRAPHY	134

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CPC	Canada Post Corporation
CUPW	Canadian Union of Postal Workers
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
KWS	Keynesian Welfare State
MSC	Mail Service Carrier
RLC	Relief Letter Carrier
SER	Standard Employment Relationship

INTRODUCTION

“Help! Help! We’re being robbed!” After jumping into a mail bin in the middle of her workplace, Rachael, an Edmonton postal worker, screamed out these words, followed by an appeal to her fellow workers’ sense of justice: “The corporation is sacrificing our health and safety for profits!” Rachael and a group of other workers then marched into their boss’s office to voice their shared concerns about an increased risk of injury under the corporation’s program of workplace restructuring. The situation facing Rachael and her fellow workers is not an isolated one. Instead, it is reflective of a widespread shift in the nature of employment relationships away from the existence of employer support and the assumption of a more permanent employment relationship.

For over three decades, the bargaining power of labour has been weakened by a neoliberal agenda of deregulation, privatization, government spending cuts, and increased global economic competition. The door has thus been opened for an erosion of past gains associated with a standard of permanent full-time employment. Unionization rates in the private sector have dropped from 21.3% in 1997 to 17.4% in 2011 (McFarland 2012). The percentage of working Canadians holding full-time permanent jobs has fallen from 86% in 1989 to 64% in 2007 (Lewchuk, Clarke & de Wolff 2011). Driven by corporate interests, the neoliberal facilitation of the rise of less permanent employment relationships has served to cut labour costs and maximize private profits. In 2006, Canada’s 100

highest earning CEO's held an income that was 218 times the amount of the average Canadian (Mackenzie 2007).

In the aftermath of the post-2007 capitalist crisis, the policies of a Conservative government have rested upon a logic of “austerity” to further diminish workers’ bargaining power. Recent federal budgets have emphasized the need to slash government spending as a pretext for the restriction of workers’ access to supportive programs like Old Age Security and Employment Insurance (Dobbin 2012). The Conservative government has also turned increasingly toward the coercive restriction of collective bargaining rights.

Significantly, one of the first interventions into collective bargaining by the current Conservative majority government was its imposition of back-to-work legislation to end a 2011 strike by members of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) (Walchuk 2011). Historically, CUPW has played an important role in the Canadian labour movement, from helping to win the expansion of collective bargaining rights for public sector workers, to securing path-breaking gains which set precedents for the unfolding of secure and well-paid employment across the country. Legislation to end the 2011 strike thus came on the heels of a government report calling for “... new and improved initiatives to radically transform ‘old style’ labour relations” in the name of “global competitiveness” (Levitz 2012)

Despite the historical path-breaking role of CUPW, the union has been pushed over the past thirty years into a more defensive position. As part of the neoliberal

reorientation of the state, a drawn-out process of postal privatization has placed the cutting of labour costs at the centre of Canada Post's agenda. In recent years, this has taken the form of concession bargaining and a massive program of workplace restructuring designed to eliminate jobs and boost productivity through an intensification of workloads. At the same time, under such conditions, the narrow bounds of industrial legality are experienced by many union members as constituting a heavy constraint upon available avenues of resistance. Reflecting a wider predicament facing the Canadian labour movement, union executives are often compelled to contain rank-and-file militancy in order to preserve the legitimacy and existence of the union.

During the winter of 2011, postal workers in Edmonton stepped outside of formal-legal union channels in a successful direct action campaign against intensified workloads in the form of forced overtime. The above story of Rachael and her fellow workers collectively and directly confronting their boss as a means of addressing their grievance reflects the tone of this struggle. What follows is an exploration of the context and unfolding of this story of creative resistance. The data for this study consists of a series of interviews carried out with postal workers in Edmonton (See Appendix).

CHAPTER I

In its submission to the 2008 Strategic Review of the Canada Post Corporation, the company places special emphasis on what it deems to be a problem of corporate culture emanating primarily out of the supposedly outdated and unreasonable goals of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and the “... numerous operating rigidities perpetuated through complex and stifling agreements ...” (Canada Post 2008, 34) Driven by market-oriented goals to the detriment of the weak social objectives embedded in the original Crown corporation legislation, with its broad mandate of “... maintaining basic customary postal service” (*Canada Post Corporation Act 5(2) 1985*), Canada Post is neglecting much of its legislative and contractual obligations. It is pursuing an agenda of post office closures, partial privatization, harsher concessions forced upon labour, and massive workplace restructuring in aims of reducing costs while maximizing productivity.

Following an outline of some of the more recent practices and demands of management, this section will explore the structural evolution of the Canada Post Corporation (CPC) as a quasi-private Crown corporation, thus deepening our understanding of the roots of the current climate of management-labour relations. As will be shown, the evolution of this particular corporate form has taken shape within the fold of a particular set of political-economic pressures tied to the rise of neoliberalism as a complex and contradictory project to restore capital’s dominant class position viz-a-viz

labour. Finally, two strategies of accumulation adopted by Canada Post will be examined that are of particular significance in terms of understanding the context of the struggle of postal workers: a program of restructuring under the banner of “modernization” and the related policy of forced overtime. While these strategies have affected a wide range of workers at Canada Post, central focus will be lent to the situation of urban Letter Carriers and Mail Service Couriers as per the limits of the present study.

In its 2011 Annual Report, Canada Post announced its first position of financial loss following sixteen years of consecutive profits (Canada Post 2011). Nevertheless, three years before this loss was registered, during a stretch of consistent profitability, the corporation appealed to an austerity logic of “belt-tightening” for its workers within the context of the post-2007 financial crisis and stressed market competitiveness more generally as a pretext for pursuing a hard-nosed approach to cutting costs and increasing revenues (Canada Post 2008). During the same year of this report, contract negotiations between Canada Post and CUPW officials representing the union’s Urban Unit began and quickly broke down, resulting in a rotating strike and a subsequent national lockout imposed by management in June 2011.

At the centre of this contract dispute were demands tabled by the corporation for a two-tier wage and benefit structure which would have exposed new hires to starting wage levels at 30% below the wages received by current employees as well as a fluctuating Defined Contribution Pension Plan in place of the more stable Defined Benefit Pension Plan (CUPW 2012a; CUPW 2012b). New hires also faced the prospect of substantial changes to job security provisions surrounding practices of relocation (CUPW 2012c).

Given the range of changes to the collective agreement being proposed, it is no surprise that Canada Post made an appeal in its submission to the 2008 Strategic Review of the CPC for government assistance in dealing with its organized workforce (Canada Post 2008). While it has yet to be seen if government will follow through on such requests as a third-party review of collective agreements, Harper's majority Conservative government has made at least one crucial intervention in labour-management relations at the post through the imposition of back-to-work legislation in late June 2011. Containing many elements which favour the position of management, Bill C-9 imposed a drop in general wage increases below even the corporation's offer and has confined negotiations to the especially restrictive Final Offer Selection (FOS) arbitration process (Camfield 2011; CUPW 2011a; Cariou 2011).

Although there has been some softening of the corporation's demands related to the special terms of new hires in the recent tentative agreement reached under FOS, Canada Post continues to march forth on a path more closely resembling a private-sector corporation than a Crown corporation with a public policy purpose. Virtually no progress has been made at the bargaining table concerning another core component of the dispute, namely, the corporation's so-called "modernization" project which centres on disruptive technological changes and workplace restructuring, resulting in service delivery problems as well as serious health and safety issues (Davison 2011). The corporation is also looking to cut costs and boost productivity through its continuing demand for an elimination of the current sick leave plan in favour of a more restrictive Short-Term Disability plan (Camfield 2011). Denying workers the ability to bank sick days, the new

STD will leave workers with less means to cope with modernization and its attendant health and safety risks (CUPW 2011b). Additionally, the corporation has continued a long standing trend of job cuts through partial privatization and post office closures by selling off its call-centre work to the private sector in 2011 and setting in motion the gears to close ten urban post offices within the first five months of 2012 alone (PSAC 2011; CUPW 2012d).

Instead of arising out of a vacuum, management goals and activities are rooted in the structure of Canada Post as a quasi-private institution. While it is a Crown corporation with public policy objectives, such as the Universal Service Obligation (USO), and has been granted a limited monopoly on the handling of letter mail in order to reach such obligations, the corporation has been encouraged by governments following Mulroney's 1984 Conservative majority to behave increasingly like a private-sector company (Department of Transport 2008). However, various social, political, and economic pressures have compelled governments, as the sole Shareholders of Canada Post, to continue to impose different limits upon the corporations' activities. For example, as far back as the inception of the Crown Corporation in 1981, governments have constrained the corporation's market activities in line with the requests of different business groups worried of the competitive advantages linked to its narrow monopoly within the communications industry (Campbell 1994). Facing such constraints, management has undertaken a strategy of quasi-privatization characterized by the selling off, contracting-out and franchising of production processes to the private sector while attempting to drive

down labour costs to match the lower standards enjoyed by private employers (Campbell 1994).

As a quasi-private institution, Canada Post's relationship to governments can be best understood through the concept of "autonomy on parole" (Campbell 1994, 297). While government retains influence over the corporation's activities in a number of ways, a key mechanism through which such control is achieved is the five-year corporate plan; a document produced by the corporation establishing its goals and strategies which must be submitted annually for government approval (Campbell 1994). Through their role in steering these plans since 1984, governments have ensured a general shift in focus away from the post's social and political goals, such as service expansion, in favour of the setting and achieving of increasingly ambitious financial goals (Campbell 1994; Department of Transport 2008). As the corporation has proven itself capable of acting like a private-sector corporation by eliminating its deficits, generating profits and, as of 1989, paying substantial dividends to its Shareholder, governments have granted it increased autonomy by, for example, defending its greater participation in the courier business through the purchasing of Purolator in the early 1990's (Campbell 1994; Department of Transport 2008).

Reflecting on the transformation of the postal system under a Conservative government in the 1980's, Robert Campbell suggests that the level of autonomy historically granted to Canada Post is reflective of the government's evaluation of the extent to which the corporation has prepared itself for a potentially lucrative sale to the private sector through cutting costs, maximizing profits, and increasing its financial

efficiency (Campbell 1994). Beginning with the election of Mulroney's Conservative majority government in 1984, policy-making became increasingly guided by a neoliberal ideology of global economic competitiveness, government deficit elimination, and the centrality of private-sector efficiency in propelling economic growth (Brownlee 2005; Campbell 1994). The view of Canada Post from this perspective is well articulated by Douglas K. Adie in his contribution to a series published by the Fraser Institute; a corporate-funded neoliberal think-tank. Adie decries an inefficient, uncompetitive, and deficit-ridden post in desperate need of privatization and deregulation (elimination of its monopoly status) in order to embed a bottom-line incentive for more efficient operations. The author places special emphasis on the supposed need to scale back the terms and conditions of an allegedly overpaid and underworked labour force (Adie 1990).

While the original Crowning of the Post Office Department in 1981 represented a lingering Keynesian logic of government market intervention as means of meeting the pressures of globalization and to address growing government deficits following the end of the post-WWII economic boom, a neoliberal focus on private-sector solutions meant that Crown corporations including Canada Post were increasingly placed under the spotlight as candidates for privatization (Campbell 1994; Parrot 2005; Adie 1990). To this end, the Mulroney administration even went so far as to establish a Cabinet Committee tasked with the function of seeing through the privatization of Crown corporations (Adie 1990; Campbell 1994). It was within this neoliberal climate of privatization that the Conservative government rejected the strategy of service expansion and job creation

articulated in CPC President Michael Warren's 1985 corporate plan, calling instead for a narrower agenda of budget-balancing (Campbell 1994).

In place of Warren's corporate plan, the government dug its hands into the construction of the 1986 corporate plan; a document which in many ways supplanted the 1981 Canada Post Act in terms of laying out a new direction and purpose for the corporation (Campbell 1994). Molded under the pressure of the government's 1986 federal budget which established a timeline for the elimination of the postal deficit and bolstered by a private-sector review of corporate strategy (Campbell 1994; Panitch & Swartz 2003; Parrot 2005), the 1986 plan set out an agenda driven primarily by the goal of achieving a balanced budget (Canada Post [nd]: Summary). Further, the implementation of the plan was facilitated by a newly government-appointed and exclusively business-oriented Board and President (Department of Transport 2008).

Formulated by a government working group outside the bounds of parliamentary scrutiny and public input, the 1986 corporate plan set forth a program for slashing costs and projecting a more economically efficient image in aims of attracting the increased business of private-sector mail users (Campbell 1994). Indeed, reflecting the governments' expressed concerns linked to the interests of certain sectors of capital, the plan placed limits upon the corporation's competitive activities in the market (Campbell 1994). Thus, significant focus was lent to developing a stronger relationship with business mailers as a key source of revenue; a relationship that remains central to postal operations today. The special rates offered to organizations affiliated with the National Association

of Major Mail Users are only one example of this privileged business partnership (Campbell 1994).

The interweaving goals of cutting costs and cultivating a private-sector image resulted, on the one hand, in a severe gutting of the postal network as part of a wider reconceptualisation of the post office away from public service objectives and toward a so-called “rationalization” of operations (Campbell 1994; Parrot 2005; Panitch & Swartz 2003). On the other hand, labour was reconceptualised as a mere cost input among various others, a concept solidified through massive job elimination coupled with harsher and more bitter negotiation platforms, including demands for wages to match lower private-sector levels and a greater reliance on cheaper part-time and casual labour in place of more stable and secure employment (Parrot 2005; Panitch & Swartz 2003).

Far from representing an aberration in the nature of the postal system, the 1986 five-year corporate plan was part of a wider reconceptualization and restructuring of the post as a quasi-private institution marching toward complete privatization; a trend which has yet to cease. Upon the corporation’s first year of reaching a profit in 1988-89, the government institutionalized its quasi-privatized structure by rescheduling Canada Post as a Schedule III(2) Crown corporation; one whose operations are financially independent of government (Campbell 1994; Department of Transport 2008). Further, the 1989 federal budget directed the corporation to increase its rate of return on equity and to pay dividends to the government as its Shareholder (Minister of Transport 2008). Under such pressures, Canada Post formulated the 1989 corporate plan which established solid profit

goals and solidified an agenda of slashing labour costs and piece-meal privatization (Campbell 1994; Department of Transport 2008).

As with the most recent round of bargaining with the Urban Unit of the CUPW, government has periodically stepped in with back-to-work legislation where management has failed to gain concessions in its negotiations with labour (Campbell 1994). Owing to government's position as CPC's Shareholder and collector of dividends, such coercive legislative intervention is not only reflective of a neoliberal drive toward privatization but also of a deep conflict of interest. In both cases, Campbell's observation that "... postal matters continue to be addressed as commercial or consumer concerns, not public ones" is a rather apt one (Campbell 1994, 370).

Still, the post's public policy goals have not completely vanished and important limits have been imposed by governments in order to protect these goals, such as the 1994 moratorium on rural post office closures (Department of Transport 2008). To be sure, the moratorium on rural closures was gained through struggle by community organizations alongside CUPW, suggesting that it may provide only a thin shield against the continuing trends of network "rationalization" and attendant job elimination (CUPW 2008a; CUPW 2012d). However, as will be shown below, the public policy goals of the post also function to the advantage of certain sectors of capital in Canada that have a vested interest in defending their existence.

Given the corporation's achievement of profit goals as far back as the 1980's and the pervasiveness of a neoliberal discourse of privatization and market efficiency which

has, according to David Harvey, reached the level of a hegemonic discourse delineating the bounds of common-sense (Harvey 2005), the question arises as to why Canada Post has not yet been privatized. To this end, it is instructive to consider Harvey's distinction between neoliberalism as a theory and a practice; the former functioning as a line of justification for the latter which consists of a complex and contradictory political project to restore the dominant position of capital following the collapse of the postwar boom (Harvey 2005). Wherever the theory stands in the way of the political project being pushed forth by capitalist class interests, Harvey claims, it is promptly ignored or reformulated (Harvey 2005). In the case of postal privatization, the path toward the complete private-sector transformation of the CPC has been laden with traditional social and political obstacles and, to a larger extent, economic ones. Even social and political concerns, like the worry that a private competitive postal network would result in the elimination of postal services in less lucrative rural regions, are heavily steeped in economic concerns, such as the government's fear of having to subsidise neglected rural routes in order to meet public expectations (Campbell 1994; Adie 1990).

Many roadblocks to complete privatization exist as a result of the heterogeneous nature of capital and the various embedded contradictory interests arising from this condition. For instance, the quasi-privatization strategy of contracting-out and franchising has facilitated the growth of businesses whose survival has become intertwined with the post's current institutional form (Campbell 1994). To be sure, the move of Canada Post toward a more commercial form has also served to bolster the position of capital more generally through the special business relationships the corporation has formed with

private-sector mailers represented by the National Association of Major Mail Users. However, NAMMU has also played a significant role in staving off the wholesale privatization and deregulation of Canada Post by representing the interests of its members who benefit economically through the maintenance of a universal and affordable postal system made possible by its structure as a government-owned monopoly (CUPW 2008a).

Likewise, due to the wide reach of Canada Post as an employer in regions all across the country, the corporation's increasing turn toward private-sector goals and management's corresponding internal war against the costs of postal labour has somewhat lowered the competitive bar for millions of employers in Canada, thereby playing a significant role more broadly in the consolidation of capital's power in society (Fiorto 2011, Panitch & Swartz 2003). It is no surprise then that the Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses has released reports and sent letters strongly encouraging Canada Post's hard-nosed approach of concession bargaining with its employees (Mallet & Wong 2008; CUPW 2011c). However, the majority of CFIB members have also indicated that they are in favour of protecting the current partial monopoly postal system; an understandable position given that this system in essence provides a subsidy to CFIB members in the form of a uniformly cheap and far-reaching transportation and transactional infrastructure (CUPW 2008a).

Nevertheless, while the activities of specific sectors of capital may have slowed CPC's march toward privatization, powerful economic interests as represented by groups such as the corporate-funded Fraser Institute mentioned earlier as well as organized capitalist lobbyist organizations like the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (CCCE)

exert considerable influence in the arena of policy-making, pushing forth an agenda of privatization and deregulation (Brownlee 2005). For instance, CCCE members constitute seven of the top members of the Canada-Europe Roundtable for Business; an organization at the forefront of the construction of the Canada-European Union Comprehensive Trade Agreement (CETA) (CCCE [nd]: Members; CERT [nd]: Leadership; CERT [nd]: Letter). As far as postal policy goes, CETA contains proposals the partial deregulation of Canadian postal services in favour of increased international competition (Trade Justice Network [nd]: CETA and Public). Thus, although the present Conservative majority government has for the time being ruled out the prospect of total privatization, steps continue to be taken which suggest a process of preparation for future sale.

In addition to the government's heavy-handed and punitive back-to-work bill introduced in June of 2011 which has worked to the advantage of management in its attempts to win significant concessions from CUPW, the corporation operates under strict financial targets established by its 1998 Financial Framework Agreement with government (Department of Transport 2008). Among many other conditions, the agreement mandates a Productivity Ratio defined by keeping operating costs at 97% of all revenues and a Dividend Payout Ratio (DPR) of 40% to be achieved by the CPC when its Return on Equity is greater than the 11% target (Auditor General of Canada 2009). Again, in addition to the neoliberal project of the privatization of the post, the conflict of interest held by government as the sole Shareholder of Canada Post becomes clear in considering these numbers. Indeed, whereas the CPC's DPR stood at an even 40% in 2008, a 2003

study by the American INSEAD business school reveals an average DPR of only 37.68% among US companies in 103 major industries (INSEAD 2003).

Further, the Harper administration's 2010 federal budget bill included legislation removing the corporation's monopoly on international letter mail, thereby forcing the CPC to operate in a more competitive environment (CUPW 2010a). Within this context, management has decried the costs represented by its organized workforce with an eye to meeting the competition of non-unionized incumbent firms (Canada Post 2008).

Provided an understanding of Canada Post as a quasi-private entity being steered by government toward the ultimate goal of wholesale privatization, a context is opened up for an investigation of the particular strategies of accumulation pursued by the corporation. One of the key strategies and perhaps *the* corporate strategy has been an on-going project of "modernization," also referred to as the construction of a "Modern Post" or a process of "Postal Transformation." Whatever name the corporation attaches to it, the project consists of a range of corporate initiatives designed to eliminate jobs, increase productivity levels from remaining employees, and consolidate management control over the labour process.

Central to the building of the Modern Post is a \$3.7 billion investment into the company's productive infrastructure in order to implement massive technological changes and a significant restructuring of the work process (Canada Post 2007). Among other changes, this has meant the introduction of the mechanized sequencing of Lettermail, new delivery methods, more motorized routes, and an increased centralization of operations

(CUPW 2010b). In 2007, Canada Post first laid bare the long term strategy of a Modern Post, citing the need to replace and upgrade old equipment in line with its “... priorities for modern, efficient operations” (Canada Post 2007, 36). The need for such renewal is placed by the corporation within the context of the necessity to “improve processes” (Canada Post 2007, 56) in order to remain financially self-sufficient while fulfilling public policy goals in the face of declining Lettermail volumes and increased competition (Canada Post 2007). To be sure, special emphasis is placed on increasing the business of private-sector mailers, the source of almost 90% of the corporation’s revenues (Canada Post 2007). Still, in proposing the strategy of a Modern Post in its 2007 Annual Report, Canada Post highlights its supposed commitment to corporate social responsibility, pledging to move forth in its plans in a manner consistent with the principle of sustainability as it applies to both environmental as well as health and safety concerns (Canada Post 2007).

Beneath the veil of corporate social responsibility, Canada Post presents its bottom line motive in describing the prospect of job loss through attrition as central to its stated goal of “improved processes” (Canada Post 2007). In projecting the retirement of 27,000 employees over the course of ten years, structural changes associated with modernization have been planned by the corporation in order to avoid replacing a good chunk of these workers, thus cutting out the costs of the wages and benefits which would have been seen by future workers (Canada Post 2008). A June 2011 CBC News article indicates the corporation’s hopes to eliminate 4,000 to 7,000 mail-handler job positions by 2014 through the process of attrition (Davison 2011). The elimination of thousands of

Letter Carrier job positions has taken place through an amalgamation of delivery routes made possible by the mechanization of inside sorting tasks originally preformed by Letter Carriers, thus forcing them to spend more time working outside (CUPW 2010c). The loss of Mail Service Courier positions, on the other hand, has been the result of an increased motorization of Letter Carrier routes as part of the process of merging the tasks of LC's and MSC's into the new job position of the "Delivery Agent" (Canada Post [nd]: New Model; CUPW 2010d).

The corporation claims that its program of job elimination rests upon a natural process of attrition and constitutes a non-intrusive means of cutting costs which is consistent with job security and the provisions of the collective agreement (Canada Post 2007). However, as will be explored in chapter three, a strong argument exists for an understanding of the Modern Post as an effort to actually push workers toward an early retirement in order to artificially speed up the process of attrition. Indeed, Canada Post has in many places sidestepped its contractual obligation for proper consultation surrounding the implementation of technological change; a failure the CUPW claims has led to an increase of health and safety risks.

One example is the issue of the new multiple-bundle method of delivery imposed in order to meet the new patterns of mechanized sorting. In place of the old one-bundle method made possible by the sortation of all mail materials by the carrier, LC's and Delivery Agents in "modernized" depots must juggle a bundle of machine-sequenced mail in their hand, a bundle of non-machinable mail on their forearm as well as a satchel filled with bundles of admail and, in the case of delivery agents, those parcels which were

once delivered by MSC's (CUPW 2010e; CUPW 2010b). Although the CUPW has complained of the notable increase in the risk of injuries tied to the juggling act inherent to the multiple-bundle method and has used the consultative process to call for an end to this practice, the corporation has proceeded with its implementation all across the country (CUPW 2010e).

In addition to eliminating jobs, the Modern Post includes an effort by management to increase productivity while asserting control over how work is done. "Modernization" has thus included the introduction of a Corporate Team Incentive bonus in aims of boosting productivity, alongside initiatives to more closely measure and manage levels of productive output (Canada Post 2007; CUPW 2010b). Another way this has been accomplished is through the deskilling and devaluing of the Letter Carrier's work (CUPW 2010b). As far back as the 1970's, different technologies have been utilized by postal management as a means of eroding the skills possessed by postal workers, thus weakening their control over the productive process as well as their connected value to the employer (Taylor 1975).

The recent mechanization of inside sorting work has served to diminish any control Letter Carriers once had over the organization and pace of their working day (Bjorge 2011; CUPW 2010b). Instead of applying the skill of manually sequencing all mail materials using their sortation cases, carriers working in "modernized" Depots receive the more quickly machine-sequenced bundles of Lettermail before heading outside and are thereby structurally compelled to undergo longer hours performing delivery work on their newly constructed routes. Further, under this system, LC's or

Delivery Agents do not even know the size of their workloads until they begin their routes; the pace and nature of their work is determined by alien forces (CUPW 2010b).

The scaling back of required levels of skill for LC's and Delivery Agents under the Modern Post can also be seen as a process of the devaluation of their work (CUPW 2010b). Whereas the sorting process requires a significant amount of on-job training and practice¹, the replacement of such skills by the introduction of mail processing equipment will likely serve to seriously reduce the bargaining power of workers. For example, a more simplified labour process might function to facilitate the corporation's apparent move toward a greater reliance on temporary workers as a cheaper and more expendable source of labour power (CUPW 2006).

Another key management strategy in recent years has been the policy of forced overtime, also known as "force-back," as a staffing measure. Originally agreed to by union officials and included in the contract as a management tool to be used in order to ensure the efficiency of postal operations in exceptional circumstances, compulsory overtime has increasingly been used, until recently, as a means of covering the routes of absent Relief Letter Carriers (RLC's). (CUPW 2012e; Stafford [nd]: Postal Worker). Given the corporation's anticipation for the elimination of thousands of job positions through the creation of a Modern Post, such understaffing practices come as no surprise.

The details of an arbitration case held following a National Grievance filed by CUPW reveal the failure of the corporation in many locations to hire enough relief

¹ Julie F. (Edmonton postal worker), informal discussion, August 2012

employees in order order to backfill the long-term absences of RLC's. Evidence was also brought forth which served as proof that a national corporate directive was sent out in 2009 instructing local management to use force-back in order to cover the short-term absences of RLC's instead of calling in temporary employees waiting for work (CUPW 2012e). Thus, at least in some locations, temporary employees, frustrated with the lack of work opportunities due to the privileging of force-back, began dropping off the call-in lists, further reducing staffing levels (*Canada Post Corporation v Canadian Union of Postal Workers* 2012).

In an educational presentation to union locals in 2010, CUPW national highlights understaffing and force-back as part of an effort by management to create an environment conducive to forcing early retirement upon older employees in lieu of the labour-replacing mechanization process of the Modern Post (CUPW 2010b). This argument is compelling in light of the significant increase in the risk of injury and illness brought on by the pressures of working forced overtime hours, especially in the winter months when absence rates are already higher as a result of more dangerous conditions (CUPW 2012e). While details of the multi-layered impact of force-back on workers' bodies will be more closely investigated in chapter three through the use of interview data, the more obvious impacts involve injuries related to winter conditions and time pressures including slips, falls, and serious cases of frostbite.

In this chapter, an attempt has been made to sketch out the structural nature of Canada Post and the wider political-economic climate in which it exists in order to better understand the strategies it pursues, especially in its relationship with postal workers.

Beginning with Mulroney's Conservatives in 1984, whose policies reflected an emerging neoliberal hegemonic ideology stressing the primacy of private-sector activity, Canada Post has been steered by successive governments to behave increasingly like a private enterprise. While various factors have influenced the unique evolution of Canada Post into a quasi-private institution, Harvey's concept of neoliberalism as an uneven and contradictory political project to restore capital's power in society provides a useful framework for understanding how certain sectors of capital which benefit from the universal service of a government monopoly postal system have helped to stave off its complete privatization. Still, current postal policy, such as the 2010 partial deregulation bill, seems to indicate a government postal agenda marked by a 'fattening for sale' approach.

The interrelated strategies of modernization and force-back have been presented as strategies of accumulation pursued by a quasi-private Canada Post facing competitive pressures and the increasingly strict financial targets imposed by government. To be sure, the agenda of job elimination, productivity squeezing, deskilling, and work devaluation that these strategies together represent also constitutes a recipe for the type of profit-generating and cost-cutting operations that would make a future sale to a private buyer an attractive option. But what has the experience of postal workers been through all of this? How can we characterize their relationship with their employer and how has that relationship changed over time? The goal of the next two chapters will be to address these important questions. A key theme will be the emergence and erosion of commitments

between postal management and postal workers as part of a wider shift in the Canadian regime of capital accumulation reflecting a change in the balance of class forces.

CHAPTER II

In seeking to uncover the impact on workers of the on-going neoliberal restructuring of the post, it is useful to consider the concept of commitments as a defining feature of the employment relationship, that is, the extent to which management is willing to offer support and security to employees as the basis of a long-term relationship (Lewchuk, Clarke, de Wolff, 11). The goal of the present chapter is to trace the changing patterns of the employment relationship at the post office since the post-WWII era in order to better understand both the significance of management strategies and attitudes in its dealings with labour as well as the experience and struggles of those workers who are the subject of this study.

Following an analysis of the historic rise of commitments in the form of the Standard Employment Relationship (SER) and the Keynesian Welfare State (KWS) which served to support its uneven spread, the unique development and deterioration of the SER for postal workers will be explored. Emphasis will be placed upon the influence of a shifting balance of class power in society and corresponding changes in the formation and activities of the state in its facilitation of different regimes of accumulation. While postal worker militancy and a surviving KWS logic of strong public services allowed for an expansion of the SER within the post from the late 1960's until the mid-1980's, the process of postal privatization will be understood as part of a project to erode enduring

elements of the KWS and the SER in favour of a neoliberal regime of accumulation marked by the proliferation of more precarious forms of employment.

Given that the process of capital accumulation rests upon the purchase of labour power as a commodity for the purpose of directing the labourers' productive capacities toward the one-sided appropriation of a generated surplus value, relations between labour and management could be said at base to constitute everywhere a relationship of exploitation guided by cold economic calculation (Marx 1994: 1867). However, the employment relationship—understood here as including various legal and customary agreements mediating exchange between the two groups—has assumed qualitatively different forms throughout history owing to the dynamic development of capitalism (Lewchuk et. al. 2011). Namely, what has always been an economic relationship has also been the site of the emergence of “commitment”; a “... broad set of social factors that reflect the extent to which workers and employers have entered a long-term relationship ...” (Lewchuk et. al. 2011, 11)

The prime example of an employment relationship defined by a high level of commitment is the so-called “Standard Employment Relationship” which developed and took root following WWII amongst mostly male white workers in the mass production industries (Vosko 2000). Evolving as a solution to the problems faced by industrial capital in its search for a profitable return on fixed capital investments and stability in the face of working class agitation, the SER helped to ensure increased productivity levels and a more loyal workforce by offering particular workers specific gains related to more secure and gainful employment (Lewchuk et. al. 2011; Palmer 2005; Vosko 2000).

Within the context of the rapid economic growth brought on by wartime production, the new norm of the SER was characterized by full-time and full-year jobs with a range of benefits, higher wages and most often the representation of a union (Shields & Evans 1998; Lewchuk et. al. 2011). As a trade off for these new gains, contracts settled within the bounds of the SER also included clauses granting management exclusive control over key decisions shaping the productive process in aims of the maximization of profit (Wells 1995).

Responding to the needs of capital in the wake of a crisis of overproduction leading to the Great Depression of the 1930's, the state played a crucial role in the spread of the SER through the establishment of a Keynesian regime of accumulation. In the aftermath of market collapse and faced with labour militancy alongside growing political radicalism, state actors became attracted to the intellectual trend surrounding the writings of John Maynard Keynes which encouraged government intervention in economic affairs as a means of ensuring social and economic stability in aims of sustaining market society (McBride & Shields 1997). State activities then came to reflect what David Harvey points to as “an acceptance that the state should focus on full employment, economic growth, and the welfare of its citizens ..., intervening in ... market processes to achieve these results” (Harvey 2005, 10).

Through the extension of collective bargaining rights to unions and the establishment of a formal labour relations system, as well as the development of social assistance programs, the introduction of Unemployment Insurance, and an expanding public sector, the state facilitated a new regime of accumulation built on the maintenance

of effective demand and the reinforcement of the legitimacy of capitalist society (Panitch & Swartz 2003; Finkel 2006; Camfield 2011; McBride 1992). Granted new legal status in 1944 following a series of fierce recognition strikes and provided a position of significant leverage owing to the spread of welfare state supports, private sector unions struggled against employers over decades to win and expand the gains associated with the SER, including pensions, sick days, wage increases, seniority rights and a degree of protection from the arbitrary discipline of management (Black & Silver 2008; Palmer 2005; Stanford 1996; Lewchuk et. al. 2011).

Existing as a government department at the time, the post office itself played an important role in the development of the KWS and, thus, the spread of the SER within the private sector. In line with the Keynesian trend of an enlarged public sector and buoyed by growing mail volumes, the Post Office Department (POD) was marked by what the Postmaster General in 1961 described as “the most sweeping expansions of service to the public since 1867” (Campbell 1994, 80). This rapid and extensive growth in public postal services can be viewed as contributing toward the reinforcement of the legitimacy of both the wider capitalist social order as well as that of existing governments in the face labour strife and the growing popularity of more radical political parties during the 1930’s and early 1940’s (Panitch & Swartz 2003). Moreover, postal expansion during this time was tied directly to the state goal of reaching full employment. It was under the directives of a government-initiated Winter Works program designed to combat seasonal unemployment, for example, that a rise in the construction of post offices took place from 1957-1967 (Campbell 1994).

Despite the role of the POD as an important element of the Keynesian regime of accumulation, postal workers were, along with other public sector workers, deprived until 1967 of the basic right to collective bargaining that was extended to other workers in the 1940's (Panitch & Swartz 2003). Although rising mail volumes and accompanying revenues meant that at least skilled sorters were provided with a certain level of income security, their obedience was also ensured by harsh legal restrictions against collective action in order to provide an efficient postal network for capital (Taylor 1975). Always of significant importance to capital, mail circulation became even more crucial for the circulation of capital during this time owing to the proliferation of credit cards amongst working Canadians (Taylor 1975). Higher mail volumes associated with an economic boom also meant the construction of more low-paid, less skilled, part-time, and temporary jobs within the post which were often filled by women in order to cut costs and pressure the skilled male sorters to boost their productivity (Taylor 1975). For carriers, this period meant the burden of heavier and heavier loads (Campbell 1994).

The early post-WWII employment relationship at the POD was also influenced by a particular political environment favouring the suppression of costs on the backs of workers (Campbell 1994). Owing to the politically unsafe route of a price increase which opened up the government to Parliamentary scrutiny, Cabinet pushed the POD to cut its costs, leading ultimately to the maintenance of lower wages (Campbell 1994). Additionally, as a blue collar department, the POD held a lower level of political prestige next to other departments within Cabinet and often lost budgetary battles (Campbell 1994). Lacking the necessary funds, the postal system did not see necessary

infrastructural investments, resulting in the use of outdated and unsafe equipment as well as poorly weatherized and ventilated plants (Campbell 1994). Taken together with the increasing loads handled by carriers, such conditions meant that the POD ranked second only to the Department Defense in numbers of injury and accidents (Campbell 1994).

The suppression of labour costs also rested upon the suppression of postal workers on the job through a disciplinary style of management characterized by its likeness to a military command structure (Davidson 1978). The military character of postal management during this time was connected to both the historic rise of the postal system as a military intelligence tool under British colonial forces as well as the post-WWII recruitment of a majority of ex-servicemen into the ranks of POD management (Campbell 1994). Managerial control seeped into every pore of the workplace through the use of one-way mirror observation galleries which could be found even in washrooms (Parrot 2005). Control was also exercised in the form of direct orders, such as the one issued in 1965 restricting the ability of sorters to sit down while performing their jobs (Parrot 2005).

The development of the SER for postal workers began with the passing of *The Public Servant Staff Relations Act* in 1967 which for the first time recognized the right to collective bargaining for all federal public sector workers (Christensen 1980). Various factors combined to push the government toward passing such legislation, including the adoption of a similar Act in Quebec as a result of the agitation of provincial employees (Panitch & Swartz 2003). At the federal level, an illegal strike in 1965 undertaken by

rank-and-file postal workers themselves played a central role in the passing of the PSSRA and, crucially, its inclusion of the right to strike (Christensen 1980).

Motivated by decreasing wages and a loss of security for skilled sorters, the 1965 strike began as a wildcat walkout in Montreal and then spread out to a majority of locals in defiance of both the national leadership of the postal associations as well as the court injunctions launched against the action (National Archives of Canada 1990). On top of giving rise to CUPW and the Letter Carriers' Union of Canada (which in 1989 merged with CUPW) in replacement of the old associations as well as prompting a Royal Commission into working conditions at the POD, the three-week strike worked to convince government officials that any ban on the right to strike included in proposed public sector labour relations legislation would prove ultimately futile (Christensen 1980; CUPW 2000). The terms of bargaining for postal workers under the *PSSRA* were, however, fairly restricted, owing to the designation of various issues as non-negotiable (Christensen 1980). Moreover, negotiations in the era of the POD took place between the union and the Treasury Board versus postal management, leading to the privileging of government finance considerations (Campbell 1994).

Following a few years of “catch up” to the gains won by other workers in the private sector, postal workers, and those organized with CUPW in particular, eventually came to play a path-breaking role for the wider Canadian labour movement, setting new precedents for the SER (Campbell 1994). Historically, CUPW has held a high degree of relative bargaining power due in part to the quasi-monopoly status of the postal system along with its easily disrupted national infrastructure marked by centralized plants

(Campbell 1994). Moreover, collective action proceeding the example of the 1965 strike was often underscored by a willingness on behalf of the rank-and-file and even union officials to challenge and even defy governments and the law, placing significant pressure behind their demands (CUPW 2000). One of the most famous examples of a president-setting gain won by CUPW was the securing of paid maternity leave in 1981 through a bitter forty-two day strike (Nichols 2012).

During the 1970's, the persistent agitation of rank-and-file CUPW members and the eventual support of union representatives resulted in concessions from the Treasury Board surrounding the processes of technological change; an extension of the limits of the SER beyond the established norm of unilateral managerial control over the shaping of the labour process. The first major victory in this on-going struggle was the reclassification in 1974 of a category of lower-paid workers known as “coders” who emerged as part of the first major wave of automation at the post office (CUPW [nd]: Our History). Along with the pressure created by a union-supported “Boycott the Postal Code” campaign, the winning of reclassification—and with it greater wage parity—came on the heels of a two-week national illegal strike which had its genesis in the local rank-and-file occupation of the Montreal Post Office (Parrot 2005; Taylor 1975).

The symbolic high mark of CUPW's struggle to ensure security for its members with respect to technological change was the winning of article 29; an article of the collective agreement which to this day outlines a process of notification, consultation and arbitration surrounding management's introduction of new technologies and workplace restructuring in general (Canada Post 2008; CUPW 2008b). Introduced as a result of a

forty-two day strike underscored by the union’s demand for greater influence over the implementation of mechanization which under management control was leading to trends of increasing alienation and poor working conditions (Campbell 1994), article 29 mandates the elimination of “all injustices to or adverse effects on employees and any denial of their contractual or legal rights which might result from [technological] changes” (*CUPW-Canada Post Collective Agreement 2007, 29.02*). Reflecting on the unique character of such an agreement, union president at the time Joe Davidson described article 29 as “... the best contract language on technological change in North America if not the world” (quoted in Campbell 1994, 157).

Perhaps the peak of the expansion of commitment as embodied in contract relations was the collective agreement of 1985; the last negotiated contract with the Canada Post Corporation before the Mulroney administration’s crafting of the 1986 corporate plan. Owing to CUPW’s negotiating position as summed up by the theme “To Secure Our Future,” as well as a strong strike mandate from the rank-and-file, and, crucially, a surviving Keynesian logic of service expansion within the House and amongst the public, the 1985 agreement included key gains related to the protection and even creation of postal jobs (Campbell 1994; Parrot 2005). In addition to the establishment of a cap on part-time labour, new health benefits and protection from redeployment, the development of new postal retail outlets and the introduction of new services ensured the generation of new jobs as against a creeping trend of job elimination and service reduction (Parrot 2005).

Finally, beyond the realm of contract language, the level of commitment shared between postal workers and their employer into the early 1980's is evident in the decision-making role afforded to union officials during one of the most significant developments of the postal system in its entire history; the creation in 1981 of the Canada Post Corporation. Under the umbrella of the Canadian Labour Congress, postal union representatives played a hand in the legislative process establishing Canada Post as members of a tripartite committee alongside government and POD officials (Campbell 1994; Parrot 2005). Granted participation as long-time advocates of postal Crowning which offered the prospect of bargaining under the *Canada Labour Code* instead of the more restrictive *PSSRA*, union officials influenced the content of the *Canada Post Corporation Act* toward the protection of existing rights (Parrot 2005). Significantly, labour representatives also won the introduction of language specifying corporate obligations to maintain services and improve labour-management relations (Parrot 2005).

Somewhat ironically, the emergence of contractual and non-contractual agreements suggesting the long-term nature of the employment relationship at the post has in itself been historically temporary, taking root as it did upon the shaky grounds of a wider political-economic shift beginning in the 1970's away from the SER norm and the KWS. During this period, capital was exposed to a deepening crisis of accumulation which formed as a result of various factors, including the OPEC oil crisis, an attendant increase in inflation and unemployment, and a strong labour movement securing for workers the highest percentage of the nation's wealth since WWII (Palmer 2005; Taylor 1975). In aims of boosting profits, private sector employers began to roll back those gains

once handed to labour when the SER was viewed as a sound long-term investment in stability, viewing it instead as an undesirable set of expenses standing in the way of the short-run maximization of surplus value (Vosko 2000).

For its part, the state began in the 1970's to move away from the KWS goal of ensuring full employment and toward the goal of eliminating government deficits which began to appear with the collapse of the postwar economic boom (McBride & Shields 1997). Prior to the consolidation of the neoliberal project, the state turned toward the coercive imposition of temporary wage controls and the proliferation of back-to-work legislation as a means of cutting costs while at the same time creating an environment conducive to capital's pursuit of concessions (McBride & Shields 1997). Thus, over the course of the development of the SER at the post, postal workers ran up against wage control policies such as the 1982 "6 and 5" program which violated the collective bargaining rights of federal public sector employees across the board by imposing wage increase limits over the span of two years (McBride & Shields 1997). Postal workers also faced off against increasingly harsh back-to-work legislation, such as the imposition in 1978 of Bill C-8 to end a strike before it had even began. The legislation even went so far as to provide the authority for the eventual jailing of then CUPW president Jean-Claude Parrot for his refusal to order striking union members back to work (CUPW 2000; Panitch & Swartz 2003).

With the establishment of a neoliberal regime of accumulation beginning in the 1980's, the nature of state activity has undergone a further shift toward yet an even greater accommodation of capital's preference for less permanent or "flexible"

employment relationships (Stanford 1996). In Canada, the neoliberal restructuring of the state has been strongly influenced by the activities of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (CCCE). Originally formed as the Business Council on National Issues, the CCCE is a corporate lobby comprised of CEO's from Canada's 150 most powerful corporations which has, since 1981, successfully pursued the steering of government policy-making toward the disintegration of the KWS (Brownlee 2005). From deficit scare campaigns highlighting the need for cost-cutting to aggressive lobbying efforts directed toward opening the country up to global economic competition, the CCCE has pushed forth an agenda of government disinvestment from those social supports once providing leverage and security for workers (Brownlee 2005; McBride 1992; Raphael 2007).

Owing to the important role once played by the post office in the establishment of a Keynesian accumulation regime and the eventual path-breaking role of organized postal workers in extending the limits of the SER, the process of postal privatization can be viewed as a crucial element in the facilitation of capital's wider erosion of commitments. Guided by a discourse of cost-cutting and global competition, the "fattening for sale" approach to postal policy pursued by governments from the 1986 corporate plan onwards has in fact constituted part of a larger trend of neoliberal public sector restructuring undertaken in an effort "to modify the form of state power ... [and] reshape society in the interests of competitiveness" (Camfield 2011, 99).

Postal service cutbacks in pursuit of intensified economic objectives can be said to have contributed to a wider deterioration of public expectations surrounding the state's provision of public goods as well as the role of the state in job creation initiatives.

Opposite to the Winter Works construction of post offices in the 1960's, for example, the corporation moved in the late 1980's toward the elimination, amalgamation and privatization of rural post offices, leaving many citizens without basic local service or even without well-paid jobs once provided by the post (Hannant 1989). The latter trend affected rural women in particular who faced narrowed employment opportunities within the context of local labour markets revolving around the male-dominated resource industries (Hannant 1989).

Further, in management's push for concessions from postal workers under the pressure of government-injected financial targets and creeping deregulation, the precedent-setting role of CUPW within the Canadian labour movement has become diminished, opening wider the window toward the spread of precariousness as the new norm of the employment relationship. This provides an important context for understanding the interests of organizations such as the CFIB in encouraging postal management to pursue concession bargaining strategies or those of the corporate-funded think tanks and the CCCE in promoting an agenda of privatization and deregulation (See chapter one). Indeed, as will be detailed below, the long process of postal privatization reveals itself as a gradual erosion of commitments for postal workers themselves.

Although CUPW members have protected many past gains currently under threat, such as the sustaining of a defined benefit pension plan for all employees as part of the 2012 contract, a reversal from gains to rollbacks has no doubt characterized management's dealings with labour throughout the process of privatization (CUPW 2012f). If the corporate obligations pertaining to services and labour-management

relations as outlined in the *Canada Post Corporation Act* can be said to reflect an era marked by a certain degree of mutual support and the assumption of a long-term relationship,—as evidenced in the participation of labour in the crafting of the legislation itself—the increasing violation or neglect of those obligations by the employer can be viewed as signifying that relationship’s undoing. The examples provided below suggest that this is exactly what has been happening.

Whereas CUPW was successful in the past at winning ground-breaking protections surrounding technological change, the Modern Post project of mechanization and work restructuring has involved not only a manoeuvring by management to avoid proper consultations as delineated in the collective agreement, but also a direct attack by management on the existence of article 29 itself (CUPW 2010d; Canada Post 2008). Describing article 29 as a “restrictive work rule” alongside seniority rights and protections from individual work measurement, management’s 2008 submission to the Strategic Review of the Canada Post Corporation includes a call for a third-party review of the collective agreement which would bring into question the necessity of maintaining the article in view of maintaining economic competitiveness (Canada Post 2008). Moreover, the unravelling of article 29 protections can be traced back to the years immediately following 1975 when postal automation was used as a means of deskilling versus the rising bargaining power of CUPW members whose contracts in the 1970’s often exceeded the terms imposed by the state’s wage control limits (Taylor 1975; Parrot 2005).

Contrary to the platform of job protection and creation epitomized in the 1985 contract, corporate agendas and activities in an era of neoliberal restructuring have created an environment marked by a looming sense of job insecurity. A good example is the 1987 contract which removed provisions for the construction of new postal outlets, opened the door to retail outlet closures and privatization, and granted management more flexibility in its use of temporary and part-time labour (Parrot 2005; Campbell 1994). Since then, the union has reinforced or even strengthened some previous protections, such as the inclusion of language in the collective agreement ensuring a specific ratio of hours worked by those in regular full-time positions (*CUPW-Canada Post Collective Agreement 2007, Appendix P*). Nevertheless, recent management staffing practices have seen a drop in full-time hours and an increased utilization of part-time labour, resulting in a series of national grievances filed by union representatives pointing toward the violation of the contract (CUPW 2011d).

The same dynamic has played out in the area of closures and privatizations. Although a moratorium on rural post office closures was won in 1994, thus bringing back a sense of security versus the previous trend of job elimination, the 2012 corporate plan contains reference to the corporation's willingness to mirror the policies of other major postal systems where cross-regional post office closures are carried out with ease as a means of meeting financial targets (CUPW 2012d; Hannant 1989). Retail outlet closures in urban areas have also continued along, even in violation of community consultation processes as outlined in the *Canadian Postal Services Charter*, and have been coupled with the opening of private retail outlets through franchising as a source of cheaper labour

with no “restrictive work rules” attached (CUPW 2012d; CUPW [nd]: Whose selling; Canada Post 2008, 38).

The aim of this chapter has been to develop an historical and political-economic analysis of the changing employment relationship at the post as understood through the concept of commitments. The emergence and on-going erosion within the post of a relationship underscored by a high level of support and security for workers has been situated within the context of a wider shift in the balance of class power and the activities of the state. In particular, the process of postal privatization has been presented as constituting, on one hand, a key element in the neoliberal project to facilitate the disintegration of the SER and, on the other, a withering of commitments for postal workers themselves with past gains being viewed by management as barriers in the way of market goals.

Provided this broad view of things, the next chapter will seek to more closely investigate the experiences of postal workers in aims of uncovering the extent to which it can be said that an erosion of commitments is taking place. Through an analysis of interview data, discussion will extend beyond contract language to include the wider range of social factors making up the employment relationship. The introduction and application of a conceptual tool known as the Employment Strain Model will serve to guide this endeavour.

CHAPTER III

More and more young people are being injured and they're not, you know, weaklings by any stretch of the imagination. They're perfectly healthy people, but perfectly healthy people can't do those jobs. (Don, Edmonton Letter Carrier)

... people ... they're being pushed; ... not knowing what their job's gonna look like in the near future, not knowing if they're gonna own a position or be a 'relief,' not knowing if they're gonna start at 7:00AM or 10:30AM, or what they're gonna do with their children. (Julie, Edmonton Letter Carrier)

Speaking to some of the impacts of workplace restructuring under the banner of “modernization,” the above quotes from Don and Julie are reflective of a wider sense of insecurity shared by all seven of the Edmonton postal workers who participated in this study. While chapter two revealed a pattern of weakening commitments through a focus on the status of legal agreements, an attempt will be made in this chapter to more closely explore workers' first-hand experiences of the broader employment relationship which shapes how employment is gained and maintained; how it's terms and conditions are decided; who decides where and when work is done; and the levels of support available to workers inside and outside the workplace (Lewchuk et. al. 2011). The changing nature of the employment relationship for Edmonton postal workers will be examined using the Employment Strain Model (ESM); a tool developed by Lewchuk, Clarke, and de Wolff in order to trace the links between commitments and workers' health and well-being.

Following an elaboration of the ESM, its application to Edmonton postal workers' reflections on changing management policies and attitudes will involve a specific focus on the effects of the two interrelated management strategies of forced overtime and modernization. In addition to confirming a general trend of lowered commitments, this exercise will uncover a corresponding increase in the indicators of poorer health for these workers. Research findings will also point toward the unique positions of younger workers with lower levels of seniority and older workers nearing retirement in their vulnerability to employment insecurity and poorer health. Further, although the experiences of temporary workers will be touched upon, the central focus will be placed upon the experiences of workers with permanent employment status and their increasing exposure to working without commitments. Finally, the first-hand experiences explored herein will be limited to those of "outside" postal workers, such as Letter Carriers or Mail Service Carriers, as opposed to "inside" mail processing workers.

The purpose and function of the Employment Strain Model is to provide a theoretical framework capable of delineating the core characteristics of any particular employment relationship and the ways in which they influence workers' health and well-being. According to Lewchuk et al., the ESM can be seen as a continuation of the work of Robert Karasek and his Job Strain Model (JSM); a conceptual apparatus revealing the ways in which specific elements of the social organization of work interact to produce different levels of workplace stress and associated health outcomes (Karasek & Theorell 1990; Lewchuk et al 2011). Namely, the JSM highlights the level of *control* workers possess in their productive activities and the level of psychological *demand* placed upon

workers during their workday as key determinants of health, emphasizing in particular how low control and high demand can combine to create a condition of “*high strain*” which places workers at a heightened risk of stress-related illnesses (Karasek & Theorell 1990).

Extending upon the insights of the JSM, the ESM² moves beyond a view of the immediate workplace toward a consideration of how levels of commitment characterizing the wider employment relationship influence workers’ exposure to varying degrees of stress both inside and outside of the workplace. One measure of commitment underpinning the ESM is that of *employment relationship uncertainty*; a category used to indicate the degree of security workers experience in their employment situation, including the expectation of future employment as well as the level of stability surrounding earnings and scheduling. *Employment relationship uncertainty* is thus broken down into the three sub-categories of *employment fragility*, *earnings uncertainty*, and *scheduling uncertainty*. A condition of *high employment uncertainty* is indicative of a low level of commitment, reflecting as it does the opposite of the sense of security associated with a long-term relationship between employers and their employees.

Another measure of commitment included in the ESM is *employment relationship effort*; a category revealing the extent to which workers are compelled to expend significant mental and physical energies both inside and outside of the workplace, often in the form of strategies developed in order to deal with aspects of *employment relationship*

² Hereon in, an elaboration of the ESM draws solely upon the work of Lewchuk, Clarke, and de Wolff (2011)

uncertainty. A key factor determining *employment relationship effort* is management support, including, for instance, the existence of paid training, separation packages, or other accommodations for labour suggesting the existence of a stable long-run employment relationship.

Workers facing the threat of job loss or the instability of job restructuring who receive low levels of support from management might be forced to spend high amounts of unpaid personal time either searching for other employment or upgrading their skills. Workers facing uncertainty surrounding earnings or scheduling might even attempt to construct a base of security through working multiple jobs. Moreover, in some cases, management offers the opposite of support for workers facing *uncertainty* by undertaking continual assessments which prompt workers to devote significant energies to keeping up their performance as a survival strategy. Accordingly, *employment relationship effort* is comprised of the four sub-categories of *effort keeping employed*, *multiple-employer effort*, *multiple-worksites effort*, and *constant evaluation effort*. An experience of *high employment relationship effort* is suggestive of a low level of commitments.

The final component of the ESM is a focus on *employment relationship support* as a crucial factor shaping workers' experiences of the employment relationship. More specifically, attention is paid to the ways in which *union support*, *household economic support*, and *individual support* from co-workers, friends, and family interact with *employment relationship uncertainty* and *effort* to produce different results. In some cases, for example, high levels of *support* can act as a buffer for workers, creating a sense of security despite low levels of commitment. For instance, some workers with a high

degree of *household economic support* might actually benefit from employment relationships marked by a low amount of commitment due to their privilege in being able to choose such employment for its flexible nature. On the flip side, for those lacking the privilege of such *support*, employment relationships marked by *high uncertainty* and *effort* can place significant strains on relationships with friends and family by shifting people's work-life balance, thereby turning these sources of potential *individual support* into new sources of stress. Moreover, supportive relations between co-workers are sometimes eroded as the result of situations of *high employment fragility*, such as workplace restructuring and job elimination.

In seeking to understand the implications of low commitments on workers' health, the studies carried out by Lewchuk et al. using their ESM uncover a similar insight to that offered by Karasek's JSM, that is; the importance of the *interaction* between the different factors at play. In particular, the combination of *high employment relationship uncertainty* with *high employment relationship effort* is shown to create a condition of *high employment strain* characterized by high levels of stress which lead to poorer health outcomes. Some of the main indicators of health used by Lewchuk et al. in establishing this connection include self-reported health and mental health; pain, exhaustion, and stress associated with the work environment; work-related illness and injury; and sleep problems.

It is important to note that *uncertainty* and *effort* have also been shown to influence indicators of health independently, with *effort* in particular being linked to poorer health. Further, within the broad category of *effort*, experiences of *effort keeping*

employed have more specifically been shown to most negatively impact workers' health. Still, it is *high employment strain*—a condition reflecting low measures of commitment in all aspects of the employment relationship—which most consistently determines poor health across all indicators and to the highest degree. While *high support* can buffer workers experiencing *high effort* or *uncertainty*, it tends to have an insignificantly small affect on those exposed to *high employment strain*. Indeed, as described above, workers facing both *high uncertainty* and *high effort* are likely to experience stressful changes in their relationships with friends and family, where support might otherwise be found.

The ESM is used in this chapter to assess the experiences of “outside” Edmonton postal workers within the context of changing management policies and attitudes. First off, a breakdown of workers' experiences and reflections into the categories of *employment relationship uncertainty*, *employment relationship effort*, and *employment relationship support* will allow for a rough indication of the level of commitment underpinning the employment relationship in question. This will exclude consideration of *multiple-employer effort* and *constant evaluation effort*, which do not appear to be issues faced by the workers in this study, as well as *household economic support*, due a lack of data available on this topic. Finally, the implications for health will be explored using available evidence to support the findings.

Employment relationship uncertainty

Employment fragility

Contractually, Urban Unit CUPW members are protected from lay-offs and arbitrary dismissals by article 53 of the collective agreement. Under article 53, all workers with a minimum of five years seniority who are declared “surplus” by management are guaranteed a job within a 40 km radius of their current worksite. Workers in the same position but holding less than five years seniority are guaranteed a job within the wider bargaining unit (CUPW 2012c). Thus, as discussed in chapter one, in the corporation’s quest to maximize productivity from the least possible numbers of paid staff, management has pursued the strategy of job elimination through attrition. However, the experiences of those workers interviewed suggest that restructuring undertaken by management with the aim of facilitating job attrition have actually pushed people toward leaving their jobs prematurely.

According to the accounts of all interviewees, one of the main sources of insecurity surrounding future employment is an increase in the risk of injury—acute and long-term— as a result of changes related to management’s program of “modernization” and the introduction of the Modern Post. While the majority of participants seemed to feel at least relatively secure in their jobs when first asked, further reflection on their exposure to being injured led them to reconsider their original responses. When asked if she felt her job at Canada Post was secure, for example, Rachel, a Letter Carrier employed at the post for four years, responded: “Secure? Um [pause] yeah, since I have a full-time position. Whether or not I’ll injure myself out of being able to work is another thing.”

When asked if she considered risk of injury to be a source of insecurity in itself, Rachel agreed:

For sure, yeah, I mean, I'm still pretty young and healthy ... but I've already had minor issues with my back and at least one good friend of mine has quit because she was on disability for so long from a repetitive strain injury that just got worse and worse. And I ... still like my job and I don't wanna work in the plant. So that's the only thing. Like, if I get seriously injured then it will really change the way I think about my job, that's for sure.

One of the major sources of an increased risk of injury discussed by all seven workers was management's use of the policy of forced overtime, or, "force-back." As described in chapter one, while this policy was originally intended as a last-ditch measure to ensure adequate postal services for the public, it was increasingly utilized, until 2011, as a means of covering the short- and long-term absences of Relief Letter Carriers without hiring new staff; a strategy most likely linked to the projected elimination of job positions through the implementation of the Modern Post. Mikhail, a Relief Letter Carrier with Canada Post for close to five years, speaks to the increasing instance of force-back in tandem with growing trends of understaffing:

... we've had massive force-back at Depot 9, like, for years, but in 2009 it got so, so much worse ... And during this massive force-back we were so short-staffed that routes weren't being covered at all. So they'd force-back every single person in the depot and there'd still be whole entire routes that wouldn't be done.

Every single worker had a story to tell on the topic of injuries incurred under the conditions of force-back involving either themselves or co-workers in their depot. Key factors contributing to an increase of injury under force-back can be drawn from these stories, including; the feeling of being rushed as a means of avoiding or dealing with forced overtime; working while tired and exhausted; working in the dark; and working long hours in cold temperatures due to the prevalence of force-back during the winter months (injury and absence rates tend to climb more generally in winter conditions).

Workers thus describe many injuries resulting from slips and falls, as well as those inflicted by extreme cold. Mikhail recounts:

Well 2009 was insane. I got forced back that year every day for probably a month or just over a month. Yes, the injury rates were astronomical at that time and it was mostly, you know, fatigue. And Edmonton is pretty far north and on Christmas Eve every year it's *dark*, dark at like 3:30, right? And also in the wintertime, walking is really tough work ... When you're trekking through the snow, especially if it's fresh snow, it's like you can't even stand ... There's all sorts of incidental things and it makes force-back during that time a lot more terrible. And so people are out until 6:00 or 7:00, they're getting tired; it's been dark for three and a half hours, and so lots of falls. And this year wasn't brutal, but we did have cold injuries as well, so, frostbite, especially on the face and hands.

Chris, a Letter Carrier working for Canada Post for almost ten years, remembers the day he got frostbite while doing force-back:

Actually, the day I got frostbite on my toes, I was forced back that day and it was, I think, the coldest day of the year up until that point ... And, anyway, yeah, so that was my first time getting ... an injury that maybe you could say that, you know, that in a cold temperature, yeah, I can still feel that in my, in my foot. Like, my toes still get colder before the other toes.

Sharon, an MSC with Canada Post for nearly seven years, hurt her back and knee from a slip on the ice; an injury she attributes to feeling rushed while working under force-back. While the time restrictions of airplane courier services meant that MSC's could not be made to extend their working days, force-back for these workers took the form of being pressured to work through their breaks. For Sharon, slipping and falling while working under such pressure meant some time spent in the hospital and time taken off of work due to a torn meniscus in her knee and a bulging disc in her back.

Phineas, an MSC at the post for around seven years, hurt his leg badly under the pressures of force-back while rushing to empty a street letterbox. He describes his injury:

One time I was moving out of my truck to empty a street's letterbox and I slipped on some ice on the step and I landed on my keys and PDT from about the second step of the truck quite hard. And I've still got, actually, a—basically this disfiguration on my leg from the bruising and, I dunno, [laughs] my orthopaedic surgeon told me it's probably never going to go away.

It is important to note as well the different experiences of younger workers in their twenties and thirties, from those of older workers over the age of forty, in their respective exposure to the risks of force-back. Many older carriers were able to obtain doctor's notes exempting them from forced overtime as a health and safety issue, hence the brunt of forceback appears to have fallen mainly on the backs of younger carriers. Don, a Letter Carrier employed at the post for nearly thirty-five years, explains the situation:

... a lot of older Letter Carriers have letters on their files that they can't be made to do force-back as a health and safety issue. So, in my particular station, it was almost half the entire station that had these letters and it was really only all the young employees, like, between thirty and twenty years of age, they were being forced back ... And they were being forced back almost every single day. They were exhausted!

Don also highlights the higher risk of injury experienced by younger carriers as a result of their uneven exposure to force-back:

I think Canada Post sorta thought that young people had more resilience and that they could work them harder and faster. Because the kind of injuries you hear they're getting in their twenties and thirties, you never heard about those kinds of injuries until people had been working until ten or twenty years. ... like, injuries where you need an operation on your knee cap because it was blown out; pretty serious injuries ...

The second major source of an increased risk of injury discussed at length by each worker has been the implementation of the Modern Post; a project of restructuring toward job position elimination and increased productivity which involves the increased mechanization of Lettermail sorting, new methods of delivery, job reclassification, the motorization of routes, and more centralized operations. Some of the main factors contributing to a shared sense of risk of injury for the workers interviewed include conditions such as; longer hours working outside and more working in the dark; increased workloads and a quicker pace of work; and the “juggling” of tasks at work. Speaking on some of her fears of the Modern Post during its implementation at her depot, Julie, a Letter Carrier who has been working at Canada Post for six years, highlights the reality of longer days and working in the dark:

... like, we're gonna be working in the dark, so being on the street in the dark. Routes got substantially longer because machines are now sorting our mail as opposed to humans sorting the mail. So what used to be about two to three hours inside is now, you know, forty-five minutes to an hour. So that's two extra hours out on the street walking, potentially in the dark. Especially if you're a 'wave two,' ... your shift doesn't end until 6:00, it's dark around 4:00 in the winter, right? So for two hours wandering around in the dark, it's scary. I definitely think injuries are going to increase.

By “wave two,” Julie is referring to the new scheduling structure introduced under the Modern Post which has seen the splitting up of shifts into two separate waves. Among other things, this has allowed for the sharing of sorting cases between carriers, thus facilitating the amalgamation and greater centralization of depots.

In addition to the dangers of working in the dark stemming from new scheduling practices, restructuring to create longer routes can lead to some serious injuries in itself due to the strain of increased workloads. Thus, Chris recounts:

I've seen a lot of injuries, especially at Depot 4. Well, over I guess maybe four or five years ago they did a pretty bad restructure where they deleted six full-time positions and they basically just took ... the work those people did [and] they just spread it over everybody else's workload for the day ... So I see people actually breaking their legs ... some of them very seriously broken, actually.

The merging of Letter Carrier and Mail Service Carrier job positions to create the new Delivery Agent job classification has also increased workloads. For Sharon, the transformation from being an MSC to undertaking the tasks of a Delivery Agent has involved the taking on of more duties as well as a quicker pace of work. She explains:

As an MSC I just delivered parcels, cleared retail outlets, and street letter boxes, as well as commercial pickups. Now I also have Lettermail or a Letter Carrier duties on top ... I find that I have to pick up my pace at work at least twice the amount which, yes, has caused strain on my body.

Finally, many workers pointed to the impacts of the new methods of delivery accompanying the new mechanized sorting process. Mikhail discusses the risk of injury created by the multiple-bundle delivery method, or, what he calls the “four and a half-pull system”:

So right now the way that it works is that when you're sorting your mail, you put your letters in first and then you put in your flats, like, oversized mail, and then you sort in your junk mail, and then you have your parcels as a Letter Carrier ... So now you just have one bundle ... Well, the way they wanna do it now is you don't sort your letters at all, you just take a pack that they bundle in your truck and then you kind of sort your flats. And so you have your letters in your left hand, your flats in your right hand, and then you have to reach over while holding the flats and finger your mail out and then hold on to your mail, reach over and get your flats out, reach into your satchel to grab your junk mail, go into your satchel

again if you have a parcel and, now that they have scanners, you have to use a scanner as well.

So, apart from the repetitive strain injuries of doing that all day, with the four different hand movements, you're gonna have people tripping all over the place because they just can't do it ...

As was the case with force-back, age seems to play an important role in shaping workers' experiences of the conditions of the Modern Post. It is not so evident in this case, though, that either younger or older carriers bare most of the brunt of the changes taking place in terms of their exposure to the risk of injury. However, it does seem as though older carriers—who are closer to retirement and who may already experience strain on their bodies as a result of their decades of work as carriers—are being pushed toward early retirement for fear of working in pain or having to deal with future injuries under the Modern Post. For Don, after thirty-five years at the post, the motorization of routes means that he would no longer be able to use a cart for delivering mail and would thus run the risk of reintroducing prior back problems; a prospect, among other factors, which has lead him to consider retiring early.

... I went through the training on how to do this new method of delivery with the motorizing, and the cart that I use wouldn't even fit in the vehicle. So I would ... be at a disadvantage. I would be having to go back to using a bag and I had a lot of back problems before I started using the cart so that would be a problem, I think.

Don goes on to point out that the conditions created by Modern Post have been incentive for many older carriers to head for the door:

And plus you're walking more ... So, yeah, for an older carrier it begins to look significant. Anyone who's near retirement who's working at the station I am in, it's like [laughs] a rush to get out the door. There's a whole bunch of people that

are retiring now that probably wouldn't have and would have worked longer for the post.

Mikhail sees this dynamic as part of a “rotating door” strategy on the part of management:

... with the Modern Post they wanna create sort of a rotating door for Letter Carriers where people won't be able to work long enough to get a full pension, right? ... So you work people to death on a grueling job with long hours in the cold and then once they're say thirty-five or forty, unless they're exceptionally fit individuals, they probably just won't be able to handle it anymore. They'll retire with either a meager pension or no pension and then they'll hire another twenty-year-old...

The experience of *employment fragility* as expressed by these workers also extends beyond the risk of being injured out of work. Both Don and Julie, for example, wonder what job they will be able to do following the motorization of routes, given that neither of them have a drivers' license. For Julie, this is a matter of physical limitation involving problems with her eyesight. She explains:

I don't like to drive, first and foremost. But, secondly, I have a blind eye and my vision's been deteriorating over the years and so pretty soon I won't be able to have a drivers' liscence which, again, concerns me about my job and my security, right? Like, they're gonna stick me in the plant or whatever the case may be.

For Don, it is yet another factor pushing him toward early retirement:

... I could have done that [get a drivers' licence], but at the age of sixty I just thought that, you know, getting a license at the age of sixty in order to slave away at Canada Post for five more years didn't really make sense to me.

Scheduling uncertainty

Discussion with workers uncovers the role of force-back as well as restructuring under the Modern Post in shaping the stability and predictability of work schedules. For instance, being forced to work overtime or knowing that one could be forced to work

overtime on any day is articulated by Chris as constituting a source of uncertainty which influences workers' abilities to plan their lives accordingly. According to Chris:

... you develop friendships with people and everybody has other responsibilities, especially, like, parents, right? ... Parents ... they're upset they weren't able to feed their kids properly, they weren't helping them with their homework ...

Moreover, the forced overtime of permanent employees also created scheduling uncertainty for temporary workers since it often meant that they were not being called-in to fill short-term absences. Mikhail explains:

... we were having brutal force-back ... and we found out later that there was like thirty or forty terms who were sitting on the list ... waiting for work while Letter Carriers were getting forced back.

The restructuring of delivery routes under the Modern Post has also increased scheduling uncertainty for some workers. Specifically, the mostly younger workers with lower levels of seniority, such as those with under or just over five years, have been more likely to lose their regular routes, often being forced to assume Relief Letter Carrier positions marked by less stable hours. Not owning a stable and predictable route of their own, RLC's cover the routes of absent Letter Carriers as either Vacation Leave (VL) reliefs or Other Absence (OA) reliefs. While some permanent employees choose to hold RLC positions, Julie fears being forced into becoming an RLC as an employee with only six years seniority because "reliefs generally finish a little later, if not putting in overtime." Julie continues: "Whereas I can be done my route in, you know, five or six hours, it takes them, you know seven or eight or nine."

Further, Julie highlights the particular scheduling uncertainty facing RLC's within the context of the two-wave scheduling structure introduced under the Modern Post. She describes the situation facing VL-RLC's:

... so they split it up so that there's basically a 7:30 start time and a 9:30 start time approximately, right? And so with the vacation relief, they can't say on the Vacation Board who can sign where, right? They can't say 'wave one signs here and wave two signs here.' So, it'll be mixed. And, therefore, vacation relief could switch weekly from a 7:30 start to a 9:30 start and, therefore, if they have any extracurricular activities or childcare issues, I mean, that's a big difference between two hours, right?

Earnings uncertainty

In addition to creating an experience of *employment fragility* and *scheduling uncertainty*, management decisions have also shaken the stability of workers' earnings. For instance, when asked if they felt they would retire from their job, many workers expressed a lack of confidence in the possibility and pointed toward what they viewed as a mismanagement of their pension funds. Chris responded:

No. I don't feel ..., I mean, I have reservations. I don't expect there to be a retirement when I'm ready to retire. I don't expect there to be a fund there because I don't think it's been managed properly up until this point.

Rachael echoes this feeling: "I have absolutely no confidence that my pension will be there by the time I'm ready to retire."

The feeling that pension funds are being mismanaged reflects some of the realities of management choices. At the end of 2010, the Pension Plan had a \$3.2 billion solvency deficit, that is, a deficit in the funds available for providing guaranteed pension levels regardless of the company's financial shape (Canada Post 2010). Built up over the course

of the 2008 financial crisis, this deficit can also be linked to management's reliance on earlier pension surpluses for the financing of Modern Post (Canada Post 2007).

Other instances of pension mismanagement have also been reported, including Don's story of the destruction of documents necessary for the collection of his pension as a part-time employee. Don explains:

Well, the whole thing with part-time is that it wasn't pensioned for so many years and [now] you can select the option of buying back pension time, which is what I'm attempting to do. But I requested them to do a calculation and they still haven't gathered my files for two, almost three, months now. Then I found out through the grapevine that there were some files that were shredded, so they would be unable to do a calculation because somebody shredded the files they need to do that. I'm just hoping it didn't happen to me, But it happened to somebody at my station.

On top of insecurities surrounding pensions, workers were also concerned about the elimination of health benefits and changes to the collection of paid sick days being proposed by the employer during the 2011 contract bargaining. Rachael speaks about the corporation's proposal to eliminate health benefits:

... Canada Post just put out another offer, which I'm not exactly sure of how the legality of how that works because I thought the time for final offers had passed, but, they just put out an offer trying to take away health benefits of anyone who retires after this January.

Management's push toward replacing the established sick leave plan with the more restrictive Short-Term Disability plan, including an elimination of the option of banking sick days, is yet another source of earnings uncertainty. Julie talks about the importance of paid sick days:

... People are really angry about [changes to] their sick time. That's a pretty big issue for postal workers. Like, our job is very physically demanding and even if

you have something like an upset stomach ... like, you don't have access to a bathroom, right? ...And not only that, but, a lot of us bank sick time because of injuries, right? So, like, I just had surgery on my legs in the spring and I banked sick time for that so I didn't have to go on EI or short-term disability...

Finally, while it does not directly impact existing employees, management's push for a two-tiered wage and benefit structure during the 2011 contract negotiations reflects a move toward lower wages and eroded pension security for in-coming employees. Further, it has been suggested by some workers that a part of management's strategy in pursuing this contract has involved an attempt to weaken the bargaining power of the union by weakening the resolve of workers in carrying forth a substantial and sustained strike mandate. The use of force-back has thus been understood by some workers to be part of an attempt to carry out this strategy as well as a means of staving off employment until such a contract is achieved. Mikhail outlines this point of view:

They didn't wanna hire anyone new because they were sure they were gonna get the dual contract ... They didn't wanna hire anyone new because they wanted to at least make life a little bit difficult on the shop floor. Because if the shop floor is a little difficult, then people are tired, people are grumpy, and people don't wanna strike, right?

Employment relationship effort

Effort keeping employed

In discussing the conditions of force-back and the Modern Post, workers pointed toward a decline in or complete lack of management support, leading to the necessity of undertaking individual efforts to maintain employment at Canada Post or to search out employment elsewhere. Some workers also highlighted the generally physical nature of work for carriers at the post as requiring a certain degree of effort on the part of workers in keeping their jobs.

By the accounts of workers, the increasing use of force-back represents a shift in management attitudes amounting to a decline in support for workers. Don describes how overtime used to be voluntary:

... they've always had callback ... since I started in '77. And there are people who just really wanna do it and if you're in a station where you've got enough of them, its okay. But ... 2008 or '09, from that point on it became an increasing problem because they couldn't find enough people to do it.

Phinneas describes management's changing approach in applying the policy:

When I first started, the forced overtime was a lot more occasional ... I remember I had a supervisor tell me the first day on the job, the quote was, 'You're delivering mail, not organs. Don't sweat it if something's a little bit late.' And that definitely was not the attitude toward the newer employees when I got a little bit more seniority. That attitude definitely changed ...

He tells the story of force-back at Delton Depot in 2007 signaling management's break from an unwritten agreement once protecting new carriers from the practice:

...it was two or three brand new carriers, like, fresh out of training ... and they basically were put on a brutal walk and they were having a hard time getting it done. And so they forced them into overtime and they kept doing it over and over again. And generally it has been kind of a tactic, I mean, it was never in writing—there wasn't an MOA or anything like that—it was kind of a gentlemen's kind of thing that we didn't do that to new carriers.

Given this decline in management support, workers expended high levels of effort in order to keep their jobs under the conditions of force-back. On top of working under the risk of injury as discussed above, workers were often required to undertake efforts associated with the processes of injury recovery. Don describes the prevalence of injuries under force-back which “... resulted in having to be medically treated in a long-term capacity, needing to do long-term rehabilitation, having to work what they call ‘light duties.’”

Workers' reflections on the transition to working under the Modern Post reveal a lack of management support during this process as well. While training sessions have been conducted in order to prepare workers for the new methods of delivery, Mikhail tells a story which suggests that such training has perhaps been a somewhat inadequate measure in reducing the risk of injuries. Mikhail recounts:

... the bosses say everything's gonna work out okay, but even the bosses are starting to give up. Like, I remember one of the trainers in Edmonton wanted someone to come out and show us through the ropes and so the boss was like, 'Yeah, yeah, no problem.' And so the boss gets the satchel on and whatever and he's trying to do it, right, the four and a half-pull system, and of course, he can't do it. And he gets all, 'Well, I don't do this for a living!' And so, you know, even the bosses know it's gonna be a shit show.

Further, certain accommodations once provided as part of the job are being eliminated by management. Don's story of not being able to fit his delivery cart into the new vehicles is one example. Another example is the closure and franchising-out of postal retail outlets which has taken place alongside Modern Post workplace restructuring. This has meant fewer jobs available for injured workers and older carriers who often face long-term injuries, such as back problems or carpal-tunnel syndrome, and who have traditionally entered into the postal retail outlets as an alternative source of employment at the post. Mikhail explains:

... the retail outlet jobs are good jobs for people who are injured, people who have a lot of seniority. Like, any person at Canada Post who has thirty years seniority and has been a Letter Carrier all that time is pretty much a cripple, right? ... I talk with a lot of people who are about to retire or have retired in the last five years and they all have knee, back and joint problems, like, leg and foot problems. I know someone who is just retiring now, he had carpal tunnel and he had both of his carpal tunnel surgeries done at once and had three months off that he had banked up over thirty-two years at Canada Post. And so people like that traditionally go

into the CRO's, to the postal outlets, but since they're all being privatized, and they all will be, there's nowhere else for them to go.

While a lack of management support during the transformations associated with Modern Post has contributed to earlier retirements, it has also increased the efforts involved in staying employed for other workers. This has included not only the effort of dealing with higher injury risks but also that of searching for other employment during workers' unpaid time away from work. According to Julie, many workers who are not close to retirement have begun to consider searching for alternative sources of employment due to the perceived negative changes being ushered in by the Modern Post.

She says:

... it's only people that have, you know, fifteen years that are kind of like, 'Well, do I wanna give up all this money I've invested in my pension and try something else?' And a lot of people are, *a lot* of people are saying, you know, 'I wanna try PT [Postal Transformation aka Modern Post] and if I find something better...'

Finally, some workers made reference to the generally physical nature of the job of an outside postal worker, with at least one pointing explicitly to the need to stay healthy. Chris describes some of the demands of the job:

I was asked to do a union project in order to write a bulletin about how much work a Letter Carrier does ... And the total my, as far as my memory recalls, was 21.83 kilometers ... And then if you take a look at every stair ... the total number of stairs is two thousand four hundred and ninety three stairs. And so a typical day you burn a lot of calories. You're carrying thirty-five pounds ... We used that information and we said in a four-week period this Letter Carrier walks from Edmonton to Mount Robson Provincial Park. And with the elevation being in descent, right, from going up and down those stairs, he ... or she, ascends and descends Mount Robson. It's the largest mountain in the Canadian Rockies.

Rachael alludes to the effort involved in keeping one's body healthy as part of keeping this job: "... I'm still pretty young and healthy. And it is a job that if you take care of yourself you can sort of avoid some of the major pitfalls ..."

Multiple-worksite effort

While many carriers own a particular route which they can expect to cover every work day, a notable exception is RLC's whose job position by nature requires them to take on new routes where ever they must be filled. Speaking about new employees who, as a rule, must work as RLC's under the status of "terms", or, temporary employees, Don describes the effort involved in constantly switching routes:

...the younger people, because they are terms, are being put on different routes every day. They're constantly having to learn [their routes], they're constantly hurrying because they don't wanna be working until, you know, 8:00 at night and they're probably taking some risks by going faster and not taking their breaks ...

Since, as discussed above by Julie, the elimination of routes under the Modern Post means that permanent workers with lower levels of seniority are likely to be placed in RLC positions, many workers will be forced to expend the effort associated with navigating multiple worksites.

Further, management's use of the policy of forced overtime as a staffing measure conceivably resulted in an increased level of effort expended by those carriers forced to work the unfamiliar routes of other workers during their absence. While this element of the experience of forced overtime was not discussed by workers during the course of the

present study, the pressures of learning an entirely new route as discussed above in the context of new relief carriers were likely felt for those working under force-back as well.

Employment relationship support

Individual support

Unfortunately, the scope of this study does not include a full view into the nature of the *individual support* available to all of the workers who were interviewed. However, discussions did uncover some of the ways in which management decisions have affected relationships between workers and their families and between workers and their co-workers. First off, available evidence suggests that, in some instance, relationships between workers and their families have actually been transformed into sources of stress. For example, as discussed by Chris above, the practice of force-back significantly altered people's work-life balance. He goes on to describe how this involved the introduction of new sources of strain on worker's relationships at home:

... you can just see this force-back breaking people ... physically, mentally, affecting their home life, you know, spouses were fighting, kids were fighting their parents ... parents weren't [home], they're upset they weren't able to feed their kids properly, they weren't helping them with their homework ...

Julie reflects on how Modern Post restructuring has caused worry for workers surrounding their ability to meet family responsibilities:

... people ... they're being pushed; ... not knowing what their job's gonna look like in the near future, not knowing if they're gonna own a position or be a 'relief,' ***not knowing*** if they're gonna start at 7:00AM or 10:30AM, or ***what they're gonna do with their children***. (emphasis added)

Secondly, some workers also reflected on how changes associated with the Modern Post and, more specifically, the implementation of the two-wave scheduling

structure has eroded the levels of support available to workers which were once found in their relationships with co-workers. With the splitting up of shifts, workers share less one-on-one contact with one another on the work floor; a dynamic which appears to have limited the potentials for workers to organize together on the job in order to address problems with management. Don explains how the current scheduling structure allows space for workers to act collectively to address their problems on the work-floor:

Well, right now, people start between 7:00 and 8:30, but even the ones starting at 7:00 never really leave until 9:00 or 10:00, so everybody is on the work floor at least from 8:30 until 10:00. So any time there is a collective action or a problem or disagreement, everyone can be quickly made aware of it and mobilize, 'cause they're all there.

Rachael speaks to the impacts of the new two-wave shift model on workers' organizing capacities:

Whereas before, all hundred-and-eighty [workers] were in the depot for at least an hour and a half—if not more like two or three—every day and, you know, it meant that organizing was really quite straight forward because you had this kind of window when you could talk to people ... We were organized in ... rows ... and they did end up being these cohesive units, like social units according to where you worked So, one of the things that the Modern Post has done is that it's really taken that away, especially on the second wave. ... I think on the first wave they still have a little bit of that ... row ... solidarity and support, but on the second wave ... a lot of people are like me; they have no neighbour to speak with.

Union Support

While the extent and nature of support offered to workers through CUPW will be a topic more closely examined in chapter four, a few key reflections from workers on the subject can be highlighted here. On the one hand, the existence of a collective agreement bargained between Canada Post and CUPW is seen by some workers to play an

importantly supportive role in their dealings with management. Julie, for example, speaks about the usefulness of the contract in carrying out her activities as a Shop Steward:

... I quote the contract almost on a daily basis to the supervisors and, generally speaking, it can be helpful in resolving a conflict or discrepancy, you know; a staffing discrepancy or whatever the case may be.

On the other hand, all of the workers who took part in the study, including Julie herself, pointed toward some serious problems facing the union and its ability to represent the interests of its membership. For instance, many workers expressed a sense that the union was fairly powerless due to government intervention in bargaining and the curtailment of the right to strike by special legislation. Chris explains:

... I think CUPW is, like, daily defending worker's interests, but obviously the employer still has—they still hold all the cards, like ... being backed by government ... like, when they passed Bill C6, like, when we were legislated to go back to work, the fines, the penalties for disobeying them, [were] ... a thousand dollars a day for members [and] fifty-thousand dollars a day for union reps ... and one-hundred thousand dollars a day for the union, so how do you ... withdraw your, your labour, right?

Further, many workers expressed the feeling that the legal structure of labour relations in itself has served to limit the extent to which the union can operate as an adequate vehicle of support. All of those interviewed, for example, perceived a failure in the formal-legal grievance procedure to address workers' issues effectively. According to Don:

... because grievances can be like six or seven months to a year before they're resolved, it's not very effective. And if nothing is being resolved with your manager at your station and you have to grieve every problem, it just means there's a whole backlog and it takes even longer.

The reflections of those workers interviewed as part of this study point toward a trend of weakening commitments for all carriers, both younger and older, as reflected in their shared experience of some combination of *employment relationship uncertainty* and *effort*. All workers, for instance, share a sense of *earnings uncertainty* as a result of management's defensive bargaining demands and the mismanagement of pension funds. All workers also share some common experiences of *effort keeping employed*, such as the need to stay healthy in the face of a physically demanding job and the low level of management support for injured workers as evident in the closure of postal retail outlets. Finally, all workers seem to have experienced an erosion of *individual support* in the form of the disruption of relationships between co-workers under the Modern Post and a lack of adequate *union support* in terms of its ability to effectively challenge management practices.

Nevertheless, as explored above, important differences exist between younger and older workers in their experience of the employment relationship and it is suggested here that such differences have served to shape workers' respective exposure to key indicators of health, namely, *high effort keeping employed* and, crucially, *high employment strain*. In doing so, only general assumptions will be made, since no data is available which outlines the various indicators of health for each worker interviewed.

For older carriers, Modern Post restructuring has resulted in a particular experience of *employment fragility* marked by an inclination toward early retirement due in part to the pre-existing impact on their bodies of their years of employment at the post. Moreover, the elimination of postal retail outlets has increased the levels of *effort keeping*

employed for older workers in a unique way. However, with high levels of seniority and, in the case of force-back, the use of doctor's notes, older workers seem to have avoided crucial sources of *employment fragility*, *scheduling uncertainty*, *multiple-worksites effort*, and *effort keeping employed*, which have been associated with restructuring for many younger workers. It cannot be said, then, that older workers have been exposed, on average, to *high employment strain*. Still, in addition to an increased risk of injury, their exposure to *effort keeping employed* alone might have important implications for the health of older workers.

For younger workers, the experience of *employment fragility* seems to have been higher in comparison to older workers, mainly as a result of the uneven exposure of the former group to an increased risk of injury under conditions of forced overtime in addition to the more general increase of injury under Modern Post restructuring. *Effort keeping employed* has thus been particularly high for these workers due, in the first place, to the manner in which their higher exposure to the risk of injury has meant a higher instance of being forced to undertake long-term rehabilitative efforts in order to continue working. Secondly, since these workers are nowhere near retirement, many of them have responded to the conditions of the Modern Post by expending efforts in their search for other employment. Further, the higher prevalence of younger workers being forced to work overtime as well as the lower levels of seniority held by these workers during course of Modern Post restructuring has lead many younger workers to expend *multiple-worksites effort* while also experiencing fairly high levels of *scheduling uncertainty*.

It seems as though younger carriers have been more vulnerable to experiencing a condition of *high employment strain*, given their experience of the interaction between *high employment fragility*, fairly *high scheduling uncertainty*, and *earnings uncertainty*, on the one hand, and *high effort keeping employed* and *multiple-worksite effort* on the other. It is also significant to our discussion of workers' health that the *scheduling uncertainty* under force-back and Modern Post which is mostly experienced by younger workers has been shown in at least two cases to transform the potential source of *individual support* offered by family relationships into a source of additional stress for workers. Some evidence of *high employment strain* comes out of discussion with workers in which a heightened sense of stress is identified. In the context of force-back, Chris explains: "...you kind of feel like, from the minute the day starts, from the minute you know you have force-back, there's an *instant panic*." (Emphasis added)

In this chapter, an attempt has been made to better understand the changing employment relationship at the post with a specific focus on the experiences of Edmonton postal workers. Following an elaboration of the ESM as a model capable of measuring employment relationship commitments and corresponding implications for workers' health, interview discussions with Edmonton postal workers were viewed through the lens of this model to reveal some important findings. First, workers' experiences of shifting management attitudes and practices, especially in the context of force-back and Modern Post restructuring, confirmed the existence of a general trend toward weakening commitments. Second, younger workers with lower levels of seniority and older workers closer to retirement appear to be particularly vulnerable to the conditions of lower

commitments and related health implications, with younger workers more specifically showing signs of exposure to *high employment strain*. One area left intentionally underexplored, however, has been the nature and extent of *union support* for postal workers facing the challenges of eroding commitments. This will be the topic of chapter four.

CHAPTER IV

... we've transferred control and it's going to go up to the lawyers and bureaucrats and they're gonna hammer it out for us. And ... I don't feel a hope for that way working. (Mikhail, Edmonton Relief Letter Carrier)

... the top [union] officers, they like the media publicity, you know, the information pickets; the stuff that doesn't actually disrupt authority or disrupt on the job or disrupt the generation of money. (Phinneas, Edmonton Mail Service Carrier)

Speaking as both postal workers and union activists, the above quotes from Mikhail and Phinneas touch on some key themes concerning the nature and extent of union support available to workers facing the neoliberal restructuring of the post. Whereas chapter three included some discussion of workers' frustration with grievance procedures and the limiting effects of government intervention in collective bargaining, the above quotes turn our attention toward the internal structure of CUPW itself. In particular, they communicate a sense that rank-and-file workers are not at the forefront in determining the direction of their struggles and that union officials tend to favour a course of action which falls short of a sufficient challenge to the power of management. In keeping with these themes, the present chapter will explore the extent to which CUPW operates by and for—as opposed to above and beyond—its members.

First, a critical analysis will be undertaken of the Canadian labour relations system in which CUPW is embedded. The argument will be made that the structural framework of formal-legal unionism facilitates a hierarchical relationship between union officials and

rank-and-file workers. Emphasis will be placed upon the manner in which a highly regulated and restrictive labour relations system has generally compelled union leaders to police the activities of their membership so as to protect the legitimacy and survival of the union institution. Additionally, attention will be paid to the particular social and material interests of labour officialdom which have served, in some cases, to reinforce this top-down relationship.

Next, the history of CUPW as a particularly militant union which has won significant gains for its workers will be complicated by a consideration of the historic tensions between rank-and-file activists and union executives. Particular focus will be given to the playing out of such tensions within the context of the struggles over management's program of technological change during the 1970's. Finally, interview discussions will be drawn upon in order to further explore the reflections of Edmonton postal workers on the nature of union support. Workers' own accounts of the attitudes and activities of union officials will confirm the existence of deep structural barriers in the way of CUPW's capacity to operate as an organization truly by and for its members. These accounts will include reflections on the interaction between union executives at local and national levels with the struggles of rank-and-file workers, focusing in particular on shop floor resistance to the policy of forced overtime as well as the unfolding of the 2011/12 strike.

All official unions engaged in collective bargaining across Canada are embedded within a formal-legal labour relations system which, as discussed in chapter two, developed following WWII as a key element of the Keynesian regime of accumulation

and the accompanying Standard Employment Relationship. Government legislation, particularly PC 1003 passed in 1944 and the Industrial Relations and Disputes Investigation Act (IRDIA) in 1948, introduced and entrenched formal processes for the legal recognition of unions and their right to bargain with employers for a contract establishing the terms and conditions of employment. Specific procedures were also institutionalized for the filing of grievances and their arbitration by legal officials during the life of a contract (Black & Silver 2008; Palmer 2005). Passed on the heels of growing working-class militancy, such legislation can be seen as a victory for the working-class insofar as it has guaranteed a framework of legitimacy for labour's pursuit of gains, leading, as we saw in chapter two, to the spread of the SER for a certain group of workers in the private sector (Smith 2006; Lewchuk et. al 2011; Palmer 2005).

Alternatively, many authors have argued that the introduction of a formal-legal system of labour relations has come at a heavy price for workers, highlighting in particular an accompanying web of legal restrictions functioning to limit the scope of activities available to unions in their struggles with employers. Such authors also often point to the manner in which this highly regulated system has given rise to a more hierarchical form of unionism marked by the tendency of union officials to police the actions of rank-and-file workers in conformity with the established legal pathways of labour relations (Camfield 2006; Fudge & Tucker 2001; Kealey 1995; Mahon 1977; Palmer 2005; Panitch & Swartz 2003; Wells 1995).

While some union leaders have assumed this internal-policing role more willingly in aims of fostering a cooperative relationship with management, others have found

themselves bound against their will to a narrow set of options due to the possibilities of legal consequence and the implications for the survival of the union. For instance, as will be explored below, the failure of executive members to internally enforce legal restrictions on the exercise of workers' collective power can lead to a withdrawal of financial resources available to the union and thus its continued institutional existence.

In a study of the changing nature of the United Auto Workers (UAW) in Canada during the postwar period, Don Wells offers a compelling analysis of the downside of state-sanctioned unionism. Referring to the labour relations system in Canada as the "Canadian Wagner model" owing to its similarity to the 1935 U.S. Wagner Act, Wells demonstrates that the Canadian variant actually surpasses its U.S. predecessor in terms of limiting the scope of labour. A prime example of this restrictive nature is its elimination of union members' right to strike during the life of a collective agreement (Panitch & Swartz 2003; Wells 1995).

Wells' study shows how the limiting nature of the Canadian Wagner model encouraged the development of a more centralized and top-down union structure. Instead of nurturing and participating in local rank-and-file initiatives to challenge management through direct action (i.e. resistance carried out at the point of production, including such methods as sit-ins, slow-downs and walkouts), senior union leaders more and more tended toward the quelling of workers' militancy in aims retaining legal legitimacy and securing greater contractual gains for its membership (Panitch & Swartz 2003; Wells 1995). Further, Wells underlines the manner in which the introduction of state-sanctioned practices such as union certification processes and grievance procedures has replaced the

role of workers' direct action with the formal-legal activities of a union leadership increasingly distanced from its membership (Wells 1995).

Importantly, the transformation of unions into structures functioning to dull rank-and-file militancy is framed by Wells as constituting a crucial element of the Keynesian regime of accumulation, also known as the “postwar compromise”: gains for workers associated with the SER were to be secured upon the condition that management retain control over the organization of the labour process so as to maximize private profits (Lewchuk et. al 2011; Palmer 2005; Wells 1995). In addition to the inclusion of management rights clauses as a feature of the original PC 1003 legislation (Black & Silver 2008), managerial control over workplace- and production-related decisions has been secured through the internal policing role of union officials who channel workers' frustrations into individualized grievances to be dealt with by legal experts and who generally suppress ‘illegal’ direct actions in favour of influencing only the terms and conditions of employment through the proper legal means (Palmer 2005; Wells 1995).

A prime example of the manner in which postwar union structures have functioned to secure the interests of management over those of rank-and-file workers can be found in Wells' description of the events and aftermath of the widely supported 1945 UAW Local 200 strike at Ford Windsor. First off, the intervention of national union officials leading to the end of this strike, despite its real potential to become a powerful general strike, signified the commitment of an increasingly centralized national executive to the principles of the postwar compromise (Wells 1995).

Secondly, the arbitration ruling made by Justice Rand in the aftermath of this strike paved the way for the institutionalization of a key feature of the Canadian Wagner model; a dues check-off system (Wells 1995). Also known as the “Rand formula,” the dues-check off system has, on the one hand, created greater union security by ensuring the payment of dues by all workers within a union shop. On the other hand, strict conditions attached to the union’s access to this financial flow, namely, the employer’s legal right to restrict such access in cases of ‘illegal’ strike action, has increased the inclination of union leaders police their members to act within the parameters of labour law. (Wells 1995).

Additionally, whereas dues were once collected on the shop floor by shop stewards and could be withheld by members as a means of influencing the direction of union leaders, the dues check-off has transferred dues collection to the domain of the employer. This has widened the gap between the rank-and-file and union officials (Palmer 2005; Wells 1995). Thus, currently, as provincial government plans lay on the table for the removal of the dues check-off within Ontario—a move already undertaken by certain jurisdictions within the U.S.—debate exists among labour activists over the effects of this mechanism on the nature of the labour movement. For instance, Sam Gindin notes that although legislation against the dues check-off is ultimately designed to weaken union security, it also raises important questions about union democracy under the Rand Formula. “What the dues check-off ... places on the agenda”, Gindin writes, “is the question of union renewal.” While he does not argue in favour of accepting the elimination of the check-off as a progressive move for labour, Gindin nonetheless

acknowledges that “... having to collect dues directly from the members would put the union in constant contact with the members and it would give individual workers greater control over what happens with their dues” (Gindin 2013)

In addition to boxing labour officials within a tight institutional space and distancing them from their membership, unionism under the Canadian Wagner model has also encouraged, to some degree, a divergence of social and material interests between union leaders and the rank-and-file. The writings of David Camfield on the struggles of British Columbia healthcare workers in 2002-2004 reveal this dimension of formal-legal unionism. Analyzing the direction of workers ‘resistance against the provincially-imposed Bill 29 which, among other things, bypassed the process of collective bargaining for members of the Hospital Employee’s Union, Camfield seeks to uncover why top union executives called off a mounting general strike. To this end, he underlines the influence of the solidification of “... union officialdom as a social layer within the working class whose existence at the heart of highly state-regulated relations between labour and capital confers upon it interests distinct from those of the workers they legally and politically represent” (Camfield 2006, 17).

For Camfield, it is the specific social-material existence shared by union officials, and full-time staffers in particular, which leads them in most instances to “... oppose forms of collective action outside the bounds of industrial legality” (Camfield 2006, 11). According to Camfield’s analysis, the goal shared by most officials of protecting the survival of the union institution can be attributable to its crucial role as the sole means of their social reproduction; providing them not only with a source of material livelihood,

but also a web social relationships offering a sense of meaning and identity (Camfield 2006).

While Camfield stresses the self-interests of labour officialdom as a central factor motivating their inclination to safeguard the formal union, there are also no doubt many executive members who strive to protect the union institution because they view it as a useful tool in the furthering and securing of workers' struggles and gains. Nevertheless, the design of the labour relations system has also meant that the material interests of union executives are directly targeted in cases of workers' deviation from legal pathways. For instance, the exposure of union leaders to heavy fines for their support of illegal job actions has often compelled them to suppress this avenue of resistance. Thus, the distinct interests of union leaders stemming from their structural existence often serve to reinforce the top-down nature of unionism under the Canadian Wagner model.

In the case of the HEU strike, while the bounds of industrial legality were initially challenged though the HEU's defiance of back-to-work legislation and the spread of solidarity strikes throughout the province, the ultimate threat of an illegal general strike to the institutional survival of B.C.'s unions compelled the latter to secure a concessionary deal with government officials and direct their members back to work (Camfield 2006). To a certain extent, consideration of the social-material existence of full-time executives helps to explain officialdom's heightened fear of the legal ramifications of supporting an 'illegal' strike, including the heavy fines levied upon the unions involved and the prosecution of union officials themselves. However, perhaps, for some union leaders, the quelling of 'illegal' strike action in this case was tied to a desire to protect union

structures as institutions believed to be able to best serve the interests of their members. In the end, the calling-off of the ‘illegal’ strike served to protect both the direct material interests of labour officials as well as the long-term survival of B.C. unions.

Brad Walchuk offers some similar insights to those of Camfield in his own study of the 2004 HEU strike, calling attention to the HEU Provincial Executive’s decision to facilitate the end of the strike as “ ... necessary for the union’s continued institutional existence ...” (Walchuk 2011, 112). The bulk of Walchuk’s analysis, however, consists of an evaluation of the safer legalistic and rights-based approach adopted by top HEU leaders as the sole means of challenging Bill 29 following the cancelation of strike action (Walchuk 2011). Arguing in favour of the development of more democratic, member-run unions which offer greater space for workers’ self-determination in their struggles with employers and the state, Walchuk frames the choice of HEU leaders to challenge Bill 29 within the courts instead of encouraging ‘illegal’ working class mobilization as one reinforcing a more hierarchical and elite-driven style of unionism (Walchuk 2011). Although a challenge at the level of the Supreme Court of Canada resulted in a ruling upholding the protection of collective bargaining under the *Charter*, Walchuk reveals how a reliance on legal avenues transfers control upward to union officials and labour lawyers at the expense of the development of rank-and-file capacities to engage in collective direct action in defense of their own interests (Walchuk 2011).

Turning to an analysis of the structure of CUPW, we find, on one hand, a history of militancy marked by a willingness of executives to defy the parameters of legal unionism. As covered in chapter two, the prime example of such militancy is the story of

CUPW National President Jean-Claude Parrot serving time in jail for refusing to direct union members back to work in line with government legislation against the strike of 1978 (CUPW 2000). On the other hand, Camfield's assertion that "... the entire Canadian labour movement has been shaped in important ways ... [by] the regime of industrial legality instituted in the 1940's ..." (Camfield 2006, 16) appears to bare significant truth when considering the historic tension between rank-and-filers and union executives within CUPW. In fact, the issues which underlined the strike of 1978 are in themselves reflective of one of the most glaring sources of such historic tension, namely, questions surrounding the implementation of technological change and thus of management's control over the organization of the labour process.

Central to the demands of CUPW during the 1978 strike was the reinforcement of article 29 which, in 1975, embedded protections within the collective agreement against the negative effects of technological change (Parrot 2005). While the securing and defense of such an article reflects, to an important degree, a progressive transcendence of the limited scope of collective bargaining, the road toward this achievement was marked by significant clashes between the interests of union officials and rank-and-file workers. Specifically, the more moderate approach imposed by CUPW officialdom in dealing with technological change served to contain the more radical goals of workers on the floor. A prime example of such moderation is the choice of union executives in the early 1970's to respond to management's new automation program by focusing bargaining on the defense of skilled workers' wages (Taylor 1975). Operating within the particularly restrictive bargaining climate of the *Public Servant Staff Relations Act*, which laid out a set of non-

negotiable issues, including those related technological change, union executives chose a bargaining strategy rooted in the logic of greater productivity justifying greater monetary reward for workers (Panitch & Swartz 2003; Taylor 1975). In short, they argued for steps to be taken to somehow safeguard the necessity of productive skill as part of the new labour process in order to safeguard the wages of skilled workers (Taylor 1975).

In pursuing this strategy, the activities of union officialdom in many ways ran counter to the interests of rank-and-file workers, a number of whom had been engaged in daily shop floor struggles against management's control over the productive process since the strike of 1965 (Taylor 1975). Utilizing the leverage of their skilled positions, these workers had become accustomed to carrying-out direct action tactics such as “dogging-it,” that is, slowing down the pace of work, in response to management's attempts to squeeze from them greater levels of productivity (Taylor 1975). While union officials recognized management's plans for technological change as constituting an attack on workers' control over the productive process through the removal of skill, their strategy placed them at odds with those workers' who sought to oppose outright this process as it unfolded (Taylor 1975).

For instance, during management's unilateral implementation of automation in 1972, union executives rejected workers' demands for a wildcat strike against such measures, favouring instead the pursuit of state-sanctioned bargaining processes. Further, the logic brought to the bargaining table by union officials stressing a tight link between wages and productivity clashed heavily with workers' direct action tactics at the point of production. As workers' expressed their dissatisfaction with the process of automation

through continued direct action, for example, management made good use of this logic during contract negotiations by refusing a wage increase on the grounds of declining levels of productivity (Taylor 1975). It comes as little surprise then that during these same negotiations, union executives refused to coordinate a series of erupting wildcat strikes on the grounds that they served to undermine the bargaining position of the union (Taylor 1975).

Although, as seen in chapter two, the support and facilitation of national union leaders of a nation-wide illegal strike in 1974 eventually led to the winning of wage parity for the unskilled job categories created by automation, the above story is merely one example of an historic tendency toward a divergence of interests between CUPW officials and their members under the Canadian Wagner model. Indeed, the Montreal wildcat strike against managerial harassment which first gave rise to the national strike of 1974 was initially opposed by national and regional executive members (Taylor 1975). The eventual support of national leaders was secured, in large part, as the result of the pressures created by a resilient and determined local membership. On the flip side, the Toronto wildcat of the same year, which sprang up in protest of the disciplinary measures of management, did not share a similar fate and was instead broken by regional union officials (Taylor 1975).

Interview discussions with Edmonton postal workers reveal the continued influence of the restrictive Canadian Wagner model on the internal structure of CUPW and highlight the structural barriers in the way of a supportive relationship between union leaders and rank-and-filers as they face the challenges of neoliberal restructuring at the

post. In particular, workers raised concerns surrounding the tendencies of union executives at local and national levels to quell workers' militancy on the shop floor; to disempower workers through the channeling of their frustrations into formal-legal processes; and to seek control over the direction of workers' struggles. Crucially, as will be seen below, such tendencies were most often structural as opposed to ideological.

In discussing instances of workers' direct action at the point of production and, in particular, the playing out of workers' resistance against the policy of forced overtime, many workers identified the phenomenon of a 'bottleneck' developing within the local union office which functioned to halt the intensification and spread of such resistance. While the full story of this wave of resistance will be the main topic of chapter five, what is important here is to explore workers' accounts of this 'bottleneck,' a prime example of which is the events that took place in 2007 at Edmonton's Delton Depot. In a nutshell, the forcing of new employees to work overtime at Delton in 2007 sparked resistance from fellow carriers in the form of a short walkout, lasting no more than an hour and resulting in management's imposition of five-day suspensions for all workers within the depot as well as the levying of fines against the union reaching fifty-thousand dollars.

Crucially, the accounts of some workers suggest that the struggle launched by Delton rank-and-filers in 2007 appears to have been largely isolated and thus severely weakened as a result of a lack of adequate union support, with local officials shying away from endorsing the action and failing to spread resistance across depots through established lines of communication. Speaking on these events as both a postal worker and union activist in Edmonton, Rachael explains: "... it really turned into a bottleneck in the

union because ... the local ... didn't really know how to deal with it, so it just kind of died." Getting more specific, she points toward the constraints of formal-legal unionism: "... despite [the president of the local] being supportive of the wildcat, his hands were tied legally ..."

Phinneas also describes the lack of local union support for workers during the Delton wildcat: "... a lot of Delton people felt that the union's response was not adequate. They wanted to see more support for what they'd done, so they felt kind of sold out and hung out to dry." Like Rachael, he highlights the influence of the legal boundaries in which CUPW local executives must operate:

... doing the stuff like developing and building off of Delton is not really legal under the Labour Relations Act, ... under the way labour relations is set up. So then there's an ... incentive not to do that because it's gonna get you in shit. And, literally, I've had an executive member say, 'If I back that course of action, I'm gonna lose my house. Are you telling me it's worth it to lose my house?' And that's not an unjustified position to take.

In addition to highlighting the restrictive nature of the Canadian Wagner model, the story told by Phinneas also underscores the manner in which the material interests of union officialdom are targeted directly by the punitive mechanisms of the labour relations system. Through consideration of the unique position of union executives who would face fines in the hundreds of thousands of dollars for supporting 'illegal' direct action, therefore risking the loss of their houses, Phinneas' story pin-points the intertwining of the livelihood of officials with their defense of formal-legal unionism. On a similar line, Mikhail, a fellow union activist, explains: "... in theory ... they [local union officials]

supported us, right, but they can't say they're for it [direct action] ... because if they say they're for it, they start getting slapped with thousands of dollars of fines ...”

Workers' accounts also describe a structural tendency on behalf of officialdom to promote and uphold the following of established legal processes in place of direct action as a means for members to address their frustrations on the job. For example, in discussing the unfolding of direct action efforts against force-back following Delton 2007, Rachael recounts the response of local officials who worked to uphold a formal grievance process over the initiatives of rank-and-file workers

They [local officials] were in the process at that time of preparing for a National Policy Grievance on force-back. So they wanted, I think, to channel the energy that was coming from the floor into the proper channels of this grievance that had already started. And ... *the way they were acting was more structural than personality*. The local executive doesn't want to be in a position of having to be fighting for people's jobs. It's a drain on resources and it sucks for them ... and ... one of the problems with that is that it's incredibly patronizing, right? It's like ... 'we're the experts, you know, we'll calm it down. We'll channel it through the proper channels and everything will be fine.'

Commenting on the nature of CUPW's response to the challenges facing its membership, Mikhail points to the formal grievance procedure as a prime example of an overarching trend toward the transferring of decision-making control out from the hands of rank-and-file workers and into the hands of union bureaucrats and legal experts to the ultimate benefit of the employer. Mikhail explains: “Grievances take what occurs on the shop floor and should be resolved on the shop floor and it transfers those issues from the shop floor up to trained bureaucrats on both sides who fight it out in two or three years time. I mean, that's the way it sort of disempowers people ... and empowers the bosses.”

Discussing the events of the 2011/12 rotating strike during contract negotiations for CUPW's Urban Unit, Mikhail points to the choice of national union executives to challenge back-to-work legislation through the courts as reflecting the same dynamic of disempowerment for rank-and-file workers which accompanies the grievance process. Confirming the insights of Walchuk which point to the facilitation of a more hierarchical style of unionism through the pursuit of a legalistic rights-based approach, Mikhail frames the issue:

... do we try to solve our problems ... right now, being forced back by the government, ... by transferring power up to the employers and bureaucrats? Or, do you try to settle it through class means ... by trying to build maybe a general strike or something like that? But the way it's played out is that we've transferred control and it's going to go up to the lawyers and bureaucrats and they're gonna hammer it out for us. And ... I don't feel a hope for that way working.

The reflections offered by Phinneas on the choice of union officials to hold up a highly legalistic avenue for addressing repressive government legislation instead of agitating for militant working-class resistance serve to highlight, yet again, the restricted position of labour officials and their vulnerability to material consequences. Speaking within the context of the massive fines facing executives who might choose to defy back-to-work legislation, Phinneas says:

I think our strategy right now is to fight it in the courts ... I think it's a mistake. I think, though, if you consider the fact that you've got a bunch of people, namely, the leadership, who's being threatened to lose their houses and livelihood and all sorts of nasty stuff, ... it's completely understandable that this is the strategy that they would pick. And it's completely understandable that they would harbour naive illusions, frankly, about this working in our favour. ... I would probably try to find ways to rationalize it, too, if it was me.

While all of the above discussion points toward the structural tendency of union officials to direct the struggles of rank-and-file workers within the bounds of industrial

legality, workers' accounts provide some additional examples of this inclination which are worth noting. For instance, Phinneas reveals the important role played by the union leadership in facilitating an end to the 2011/12 strike in line with government legislation.

He recounts:

... the main way they got us back to work with the back-to-work legislation was calling a mass meeting and more or less just running the credits and they just basically started a narrative that it was over. And half the room was just so demoralized that they just got up and left and the other half was just sort of like 'huh, I guess it's over. ... And the whole workshop was scripted by people in the national office and then executed by activists that were hand-picked from the local ...

Uncovering the more subtle forms that this top-down direction can assume, Rachael speaks about the pattern of union officials directing the energies of union activists into more moderate union projects. Specifically, she highlights the way in which union activists off the floor were encouraged by union officials to spend their time performing tasks related to route measurement during the implementation of Modern Post as a means of influencing the process of route restructuring as it unfolds. When asked if she views this push by local union executives for activists to engage in route measurement tasks as a method for quelling militancy on the shop floor, she responds:

Yeah, and not just quelling militancy. ... in the last couple years there's this sort of a layer of leadership that's kind of emerged, and so it's not just about quelling militancy, although that's part of it, but there's this tug-of-war between the two sides [union officials and rank-and-file organizers] on this group of people who are great, committed union activists, but aren't totally entrenched on either side.

What we can draw from Rachael's observations is that local union executives have attempted not only to directly curb militancy on the shop floor, but to shape the contours of workers' struggles in the long-term by winning over the time and energies of key union

activists to the pursuit of formal-legal avenues as the sole means for addressing problems with management.

The goal of this chapter has been to provide a closer look at the nature and extent of union support available to postal workers facing a neoliberal erosion of commitments within their employment relationship. Drawing on existing critical studies of the labour relations system in Canada, it has been argued that the highly restrictive Canadian Wagner model has facilitated the emergence of a more hierarchical and bureaucratic form of unionism marked by the tendencies of union officials to dampen the militancy of rank-and-file workers to the ultimate benefit of management. Striving to protect the institutional existence and legal legitimacy of the formal union, labour officialdom has often taken on the responsibility of directing and policing the activities of their membership within the tight bounds of industrial legality. While many executives view the safeguarding of the union as a matter of standing up for workers, consideration of the particular structural existence of officials reveals the influence of their own material and social interests which, in some cases, serve to reinforce a top-down union structure.

Following a brief overview of some of historic points of tension between the interests of officials and rank-and-filers within CUPW, interview discussions with Edmonton posties have revealed the tendency on behalf of union executives at local and national levels to direct, in different ways, the struggles of their membership in conformity with formal-legal unionism. Regardless of the theoretical inclinations of its leadership, rather than offering support and solidarity as an organization by and for its members, the moulding of CUPW under the structural weight of the Canadian Wagner

model has meant that it functions, to a significant degree, as an entity existing above and outside the influence and interests of the workers it is supposed to represent. Given this situation, the question arises as to what might be the best way forward for postal workers seeking to challenge the dominance of management in defense of their collective interests. It is here that we turn to the next and final chapter which will aim to provide some helpful insights concerning alternative and effective pathways of resistance. It will focus centrally on the events and lessons of a self-organized direct action campaign carried out by Edmonton postal workers against force-back in 2011.

CHAPTER V

In early 2011, “outside” postal workers in Edmonton stepped outside the parameters of formal-legal unionism in their collective struggle against one of management’s key strategies of neoliberal restructuring; the policy of forced overtime, or, “force-back.” As local executive members participated in efforts to launch a national grievance for legal arbitration on the practice, impatient postal workers in Depots across the city addressed their problems with management through a dynamic direct action campaign. Spreading throughout rank-and-file networks which functioned at a distance from the local union and fed by the organizing efforts of key militants off the floor, a wave of shop-floor resistance—from marches on the boss to mass refusals—disrupted multiple levels of management. The result was a virtual city-wide elimination of force-back.

Far from constituting a smooth process containing a neat-and-ready blueprint for the carrying-out of successful direct action campaigns, the 2011 struggle against force-back developed along a path of conflict and contradiction, finding its shape amidst various social influences. In this chapter, the first hand accounts of postal workers and union activists will be explored in order to gain a better understanding of how the force-back struggle came together with an eye to drawing out key influential factors. Following an overview of the events as they unfolded, attention will be paid to the development and functions of an alternative organizational infrastructure rooted in worker-run committees.

This will include consideration of the role played by dual-card carrying activists affiliated with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and their introduction of a union praxis known as solidarity unionism. Without overemphasizing the role of the Wobblies³ alone, the approaches and practices of solidarity unionism will be held up as constituting a primary overarching influence. Finally, the particular playing out of the fight against force-back will be situated within the context of various uncontrolled factors, including the operation of particular social dynamics surrounding age and gender.

The wave of direct action against force-back in Edmonton developed through a building momentum which saw some its first major ripples in late January of 2011. It was then that workers in Depot 9, faced with climbing wintertime force-back duties, decided during a regular coffee break meeting to refuse forced overtime as a group. Strategically invoking their individual right to refuse unsafe work, the carriers collectively defied that clause in the contract granting management the right to implement compulsory overtime. In doing so, they also broke through the bounds of labour law which places strict limits on the abilities of workers to exercise their collective power. Mikhail, a dual-carder Wobbly who worked in Depot 9 during the refusal, describes the nature of their confrontation with management:

... when the bosses came out, we all, you know, we all stood and [said] ‘Clause 3.3, the health and safety agreement in the contract, says you can’t do force-back.’ ‘Why not?’ ‘I’m exhausted.’ ‘Well, you have to do it and your union says you have to do it because the collective agreement says you have to do force-back as an emergency measure.’ And we’re like, ‘no, we’re not doing it’, you know, ‘fuck you!’ And so something like twenty-seven portions went uncovered.

³ Throughout the history of the IWW, members of the union have been commonly referred to as “Wobblies”

Within weeks, the mass refusal at Depot 9 inspired the spread of different direct actions within at least four other depots in Edmonton as they received word of the action through an alternative communication network operating outside of the local. The development and functions of that network will be examined below. For now, it is important to note that refusals like the one staged at Depot 9 were replicated by workers in other depots. In undertaking their own mass refusals, these workers were especially emboldened by the spreading information that workers at Depot 9 had not been disciplined in the immediate aftermath of their direct action. Moreover, as the ten-day window in which their discipline hung wide open, workers in some depots engaged in solidarity actions with Depot 9 in order to pressure management to refrain from implementing disciplinary measures. For example, carriers in some depots preformed a ‘march on the boss’ in support of their fellow workers; a classic direct action tactic championed by the IWW in which rank-and-filers march into the bosses office to issue demands as a unified force.

Throughout the month of February, actions against force-back spilled over into multiple depots. In addition to collective refusals and marches on the boss which carried forth different demands, workers held numerous coffee break meetings which functioned as decision-making bodies. Other actions included the issuing of petitions, and, in Depot 2, a mass of workers turned their backs to their supervisor during a staff talk. Activists from different depots also arranged for higher levels of management to meet with workers on the floor in order to discuss staffing practices. Over the course of these meetings, as well as through other avenues, workers at some depots issued a deadline to the

corporation of February 28th for the elimination of force-back. Chris, a union activist working in Whitemud South (an amalgamation of Depot 4 and Depot 8), describes his depot's meeting with Director of Edmonton Collection & Delivery, Richard Thorson. This was one of the meetings where the force-back deadline was established. Chris recounts:

... we demanded ... that [Richard Thorson] come to the depot and speak to us about his hiring strategies and on February 4th he arrived and took place in an hour long meeting in the lunch room. And the majority of Letter Carriers at Whitemud South attended the meeting and we had people give testimonials how ... [force-back] was affecting our lives, how [it] was affecting our health and safety. ... We told him that ... we were going to hold him personally responsible for any injuries that happen, that occur from this ... We said he had to fix things by the 28th.

By all accounts of those interviewed, the next major development in the force-back fight was the mass meeting organized by rank-and-file activists held on February 27th, one day before the corporation's given deadline. Drawing out well over one-hundred people, including workers from depots who until this point had remained somewhat isolated from the spreading struggle, the meeting offered a space for the sharing of stories and experiences surrounding the force-back fight and presented an opportunity for collective strategizing toward a continued and intensified campaign. The dynamics of the meeting itself will be touched upon later. It will suffice here to point out that in the weeks following this meeting, a new round of direct actions was kicked off which saw the first-time involvement of different depots and workers across the city.

For instance, a couple weeks after the meeting, workers at Depot 6, who had been fairly isolated from events taking place in other workplaces, staged their own mass

refusal. When it seemed as if management was gearing up to discipline the workers at Depot 6, their co-workers across the city conducted a successful ‘phone zap’ to prevent such an outcome. They flooded the boss’s office with phone calls expressing their solidarity.

Reflecting on the unfolding of the force-back fight and its results, all of the workers who participated in this study have categorized it as a victory for rank-and-filers on the floor. Not only did workers avoid any form of discipline, but the pressures they placed upon management led to a shift in corporate policy on a city-wide level. In the midst of the spread and intensification of direct action following the mass meeting in February 27th, management began to hire more staff, thus no longer relying on forced overtime as a means to cover the routes of absent workers. In his own writings on the events, Phinneas, a Wobbly dual-carder activist, reveals a direct connection between workers’ resistance on the shop-floor and the corporation’s hiring drive within the city. He explains: “Edmonton was hiring at a time of year when Canada Post does not usually hire. ... Some members of senior management quietly conceded it was unrest on the floor that led to this course of action in private discussions with union officials” (Gage 2012)

While the force-back fight evolved in large part through local rank-and-file initiatives springing up in reaction to frustrations on the floor, the coordination of such initiatives within and across individual worksites as well as the development of workers’ capacities and confidence in carrying out various direct actions did not arise spontaneously out of a vacuum. Instead, a crucial role was played by an alternative organizational infrastructure rooted in worker-run committees. Such committees

functioned on a both depot-wide and city-wide level and, to different degrees, at a distance from the local union office. Pointing to one of the most significant examples of this type of structure, a common chronology of the force-back struggle offered by many union activists begins with the building up of the city-wide Organizing Committee.

Formally, the Organizing Committee was established as a part of CUPW Edmonton's official infrastructure. However, as the result of different factors, including a vague constitutional purpose which does not delineate any specific approach to organizing as well as the influence of Wobbly dual-carders promoting direct action and workers' self-organization, the Organizing Committee took an important turn away from the form of unionism practiced by the local. In particular, beginning around four years before the force-back fight, this committee was developed by Wobblies and other activists—many of whom were Shop Stewards—to provide key networks and resources for rank-and-filers to pursue militant organizational activities outside of formal union channels. It is important to note here that Shop Stewards within CUPW are not elected officials with any formal ties to the union. They are rank-and-filers who simply pass through a union-facilitated course (Gage 2012). Thus, besides an elected Chair, those who populated and developed the committee held no official status within the union.

Taking off in 2007, the development of the Organizing Committee as a site for workers' self-organization found a major impetus in the events of the Delton wildcat of that same year. Following the isolation and defeat of workers' resistance at Delton, Wobblies and other activists identified the local union office as the source of a bottleneck on workers' militancy and sought to create ways of bypassing this bottleneck in favour of

cultivating more sustained and wide-spread direct action campaigns. In the first place, this included the fashioning of independent networks of communication. Later, the committee undertook educational activities geared toward the fostering of self-directed collective struggle on the shop floor. Finally, as the fight against force-back began to spring up, the Organizing Committee provided a space for militants from individual worksites to share, develop and coordinate strategies for the furthering of their struggle.

Crucially, while the events of the Delton wildcat held out important lessons for workers interested in furthering their struggle with management, the developments and functions of the Organizing Committee are also reflective of a specific mode of union praxis—that is, a combination of union activity and ideology—known as solidarity unionism. Adopted by the IWW as its official mode of labour organizing in 2002, and thus informing the approaches of Wobbly dual-carders in particular, solidarity unionism holds out a reliance on rank-and-file solidarity and the construction of “horizontal networks for mutual support” (Lynd & Lynd 1973) as the primary means for the pursuit of workers’ interests.

In place of a chief reliance on legal processes, union bureaucracy, and all other top-down mediating institutions, solidarity unionism emphasizes the role of democratic workers’ self-organization toward collective direct action as a means of winning gains and building workers’ power on the floor (IWW [nd]: Solidarity Unionism; Lynd 1992). While those adopting this form of unionism are somewhat split over the question of the rightful relation of rank-and-file organizers to contracts and legal processes, the common denominator, shared by the IWW, is a selective and strategic utilization of formal-legal

avenues where doing so does not inhibit workers' militancy (Gross & Lynd 2011; Stafford [nd]: Postal Worker).

Developed as a concept in large part by Staughton Lynd, solidarity unionism describes an historic tendency evident within the labour movement, especially before the advent of a formal-legal labour relations system. In his book "Solidarity Unionism", Lynd focuses on U.S. labour history in order to show that the key common features of workers' struggles during the early 1930's, before the passing of the Wagner Act, included the formation of worker-run committees and their coordination of collective direct action at the point of production (Lynd; 1992). From this basic observation, and using contemporary examples as well, Lynd elaborates the idea of solidarity unionism in order to reinforce the regeneration of this tendency as a means for workers to overcome the multiple barriers of conventional unionism which serve to quell workers' militancy.

Central to the theory and practice of solidarity unionism is the role of the democratic committee structure as a space for workers' self-organization. Whether put into motion in a non-unionized workplace or within an existing union-shop, workers' committees act as a vehicle for shop-floor organizing outside of formal-legal channels. Capable of operating on multiple levels, two of which Lynd underlines as the individual work floor and the wider council formed of delegates from workplaces across a given locale, such committees provide a space for the cultivation and coordination of collective direct action (Lynd; 1992). It is important to underscore that instead of playing a representative role, workers' committees practicing solidarity unionism are rooted in the power base of their fellow workers on the floor to whom they are directly accountable.

Rachael, a Wobbly dual-carder at the post, speaks to this important characteristic of workers' committees:

... the reason that ... [the committee is] so important is that it's made by the workers, for the workers. ... It's not a representative committee in the sense that they're elected once and the decisions that they make are binding on the body below them; ... they're a committee that basically facilitates and co-ordinates both the organizing and then eventually the direct action.

While the Organizing Committee was not built up wholly outside of formal-legal union channels, its development by Wobblies and other union activists after the Delton wildcat of 2007 meant that it came to operate in a manner closely resembling the structure and goals of a workers' committee practicing solidarity unionism. One of the first and most significant developments of the Organizing Committee was the creation of a text-messaging list serving as a line of communication running fully outside the official union. Built up by Wobbly dual-carders in aims of by-passing the bottleneck on communication within the office of the local, this innovation, dubbed by some as the 'militant text-list,' allowed for the instant and direct spread of information between militant workers on the floor both within and across depots. Reflecting on the impetus for the militant text-list, Phinneas explains:

... when the Delton wildcat happened a few years prior, there was a bottleneck in the office, right, with communication. And so the main thing that we saw was that there was a certain latent militancy in the post office that would tend to kick off, right? And people would kind of like—something would pop off and people would get really inspired and they'd wanna rally and they would actually all kind of flood the [local union] office, but the office would kind of balk. ... So, one of the things that we really started pioneering in the Organizing Committee was ways of circulating information that didn't rely on strictly the union. ... [So], we had a text message list.

In its functions, the militant text-list was an expression of solidarity unionism, providing a horizontal network of rank-and-file mutual support as the foundation for the spreading of direct action. According to Rachael, the first time that the militant text-list was put into practice was during the spread of actions undertaken by Edmonton carriers in solidarity with their fellow workers in Winnipeg. In November of 2010, when carriers in Winnipeg staged a wildcat in response to the working conditions created by Modern Post restructuring, workers in different depots across Edmonton launched a series of actions in solidarity which ranged from smaller-scale symbolic actions to more confrontational actions such as marches on the boss. Central to the spreading of these actions was the constant communication between depots made possible by the militant text-list. This line of communication provided a flow not only of information but also of inspiration between otherwise isolated workplaces. In her written reflections, Rachael expresses that “The mass text-list spread news of actions quickly and helped create a sense that we were part of something larger than the actions at our stations alone” (Stafford [nd]: Postal Worker).

A little over a year following the show of solidarity with Winnipeg carriers on the shop floors of Edmonton postal depots, the militant text-list employed yet again, this time as the prime means of connecting workers during the fight against force-back. Acting again as the veins of the struggle, the text-list functioned as a crucial medium through which militants on the floor relayed information to one another regarding the activities of workers in their respective stations. Through face-to-face contact, activists then kept their fellow workers on the floor tuned into the activities of their coworkers across the city and facilitated discussion on their options to pursue their own course of action.

Julie, a union activist at Whitemud South, describes how workers at her depot stayed in touch with other workers through the text-list during the force-back fight: “... every morning, if we stormed the office, we’d send [out] a text being like ‘this is what happened,’ and [an activist from the Organizing Committee] would send a text out to everyone else and vice versa.” She continues to explain how this translated in terms of organizing on the floor: “I’d get a text on my phone and I’d call a meeting, being like, ‘hey, Depot 9 just did this, what do you guys wanna do?’”

Following the creation of the militant text-list, the next major development of the Organizing Committee was a one-day educational workshop on direct action launched in the summer of 2010. Reflecting an approach to organizing consistent with the practice of solidarity unionism, the Taking Back the Work-floor course was designed to cultivate new activists and equip rank-and-filers with the skills and confidence necessary to mobilize resistance on the floor. In terms of the content of the course, activists pulled together a mix of CUPW and IWW resources in order to engage participants in the process of planning direct actions. This included materials drawn out of an advanced CUPW Shop Stewards course on the social mapping of a workplace, as well as standard IWW organizer training materials on the running of work-floor meetings and the carrying-out of creative collective actions. Participants learned, for instance, how to prepare and inoculate workers against the reactions of their bosses during and following a direct action campaign. At the centre of the course was a series of role plays centered on the text-book Wobbly tactic of a march on the boss.

Chris, a member of the Organizing Committee who played a crucial role in the development of the course speaks to some of the motivations underlying how the course was shaped:

... we just basically took what we thought would be important to a course that would sort of boost people's confidence or give them the skills to, or expose them to the skills that might ... at least plant seeds in their minds that would maybe grow into some sort of inspiration where they would act on the work floor in larger groups than one or two or three that's basically it, we wanted to encourage and inspire people to be active in groups.

Mikhail emphasizes the important role played by the course in exposing workers to new ideas about direct action which encouraged them to become more involved in struggles on the shop-floor. He explains:

[The course] exposed a lot of people in the union to different ideas. Like, it's not either you do nothing or have a wildcat strike. There's other things you can do in the interim that aren't either a button campaign, which is more or less ineffective, or a wildcat strike, which is probably really effective, but people aren't ready to try it yet. So there's other things you can do. And it showed that really quite well.

According to Phinneas, about sixty to seventy workers went through the course from the time of its inception to the first rumblings of the force-back fight. Generally, participants were recruited into the course by members of the Organizing Committee after having been identified as potential leaders in aims of facilitating their development as new rank-and-file organizers (Gage 2012). For Sharon, a union activist who worked as a Mail Service Carrier (MSC) at Depot 11, the course helped her to build new skills as someone who had not yet been involved in work-floor organizing. “[The workshop] was great,” she explains, “I took a few tools away for organizing. ... I used the march on the

boss strategy to create an action around parking at Depot 11 and, in turn, we won parking for the MSC's.”

In Sharon's case, she and other activists in her depot mobilized their fellow workers to successfully address management's parking scheme which left workers feeling unsafe in a dangerous neighbourhood. Following a work-floor meeting held during a regular coffee break, forty to fifty workers in a depot of about one-hundred piled into the boss's office to reinforce demands for better parking as spelled out in a letter which they delivered directly. The workers set a deadline of five minutes for the boss to respond to the letter. Within this time window, the boss agreed to set up a meeting where a new and safer parking system was decided upon.

Like Sharon and her fellow workers, new and experienced activists alike increasingly utilized the skills extended through the course to launch direct actions as a means of addressing their problems on the floor. The actions then spread through the channels of the militant text-list. The solidarity actions with Winnipeg workers, for example, which saw a rise in coffee break meetings and marches on the boss across the city, were, according to Wobblies and other activists, a direct result of the skills, inspiration and confidence cultivated within workers through the Taking Back the Work-floor course. The level of experience with direct action built up through such actions paved the way for the force-back campaign. In her writings, Rachael reflects: “By the time the carriers at Depot 9 refused force-back, there were a good number of people who had already participated in an action and felt empowered to do more” (Stafford [nd]: Postal Worker).

Finally, in addition to fashioning rank-and-file networks of communication and empowering other workers with the skills and confidence to run direct action campaigns, the Organizing Committee functioned as a site for the bottom-up coordination of struggle at the point of production. While the militant text-list already played a role as a coordinating mechanism of sorts, monthly Organizing Committee meetings provided a venue for face-to-face planning and strategizing between activists from different depots during the unfolding of the force-back fight. According to Phinneas, the committee served as a way to “concentrate militants in a central hub” where they could “start building the movement on the floor.” The structure of the meetings held between activists at this hub for organizing was reflective of the principle of horizontal mutual support. Mikhail walks us through a typical meeting: “... everyone would explain what was going on in [their] depot, how we could change it, and then we started developing strategies and talking about tactics, about what we can do to help make our jobs better and our lives better.”

Rachael reflects on the educational and skill-sharing quality of these meetings: “It was like, ‘Hey, this is how we’ve done it, and this is how *we’ve* done it. This is the challenge that you’re having over here? Well, why don’t you try to do *this*?’” Given the different social dynamics within each depot which created different levels of momentum for shop-floor resistance, this collaborative and non-hierarchical decision-making process allowed workers to mobilize in ways which best fit their situations. Moreover, in sharing information and inspiration, activists also gently pushed one another to cross outside of their comfort zones in aims of ramping up the spread and intensity of direct action. The influence of Wobbly activists here is evident, as Rachael notes: “... it was really an

organic way of pushing people. Like, in the IWW we talk a lot about, you know, pushing organizers ... you try to get people where they're just at the edge of their comfort zone and you constantly push the edge of their comfort zone.”

Rachael points to the developments on the floor at Depot 1 as an example of the effectiveness of this dynamic of mutual support and pushing. While the unfolding of events at Depot 1 involved the role of the Work-floor Mobilization Committee—another city-wide committee whose development will be examined shortly—the same practice of pushing which marked the Organizing Committee can be noted. Rachael recounts:

Depot 1 had no force-back and they were a really, you know, quiet depot and ... the first couple meetings that the guys from Depot 1 were coming to, they were like, ‘oh, nothing is ever gonna happen at our depot’, like, ‘we see all this awesome stuff going on elsewhere and we just, it’s not gonna happen’, like, ‘we don’t have force-back, we don’t know what to do.’ And so there was this awesome sharing of ideas and pushing and then eventually I think one of the first things they did was the coffee break meeting, which I think was maybe only four or five people. But then they built slowly and eventually they got the whole depot to do a march where they actually left the building and looped around the building and came back in. And they got, you know, a good eighty percent of the depot to participate. So you can see what is possible. And a month before that happened, even the most committed activists at that depot never would have thought that possible at all.

One of the most popular tactics shared between activists within the Organizing Committee for the ramping up of mass refusals was the appeal by workers to their individual contractual right to refuse unsafe work. Pioneered by the workers at Depot 9, this approach became especially popular following a statement from Director Richard Thorson on February 4th indicating that workers invoking the health and safety clause would not face discipline for refusing force-back. After word was received within the Organizing Committee of this new development, the tactic was carried over by activists

into many depots as a means of mobilizing workers to undertake their own mass refusals. Consistent with the central tenants of solidarity unionism, activists thus promoted the selective utilization of an existing contract in a manner which did not detract from but actually strengthened workers' militancy. Using the health and safety clause as a shield, workers collectively defied the compulsory overtime clause in a show of militant solidarity.

However, it is worth noting here that there is some discrepancy between activists concerning the extent of the importance of the utilization of contract rights as a tactic of struggle. In particular, after a period of reflection as a Wobbly organizer who played an active role in the unfolding of the force-back fight, Rachael has come to emphasize the role of collective action and solidarity above the formulation of any particular legal arguments as key to the successes enjoyed by Edmonton postal workers in this fight. She explains:

... yes, we had this relationship with the legal stuff and there were a number of people who were doing a lot of research and all of that, but I really do feel that, regardless of how we had framed it, the reason we won was that so many people participated and that so many people participated in direct action. And it wasn't because we made some good arguments here and there. I don't want to completely undermine relevance of those arguments and in particular the health and safety refusal, but I think that the reason that we got management to say, 'okay, okay, we're not going to discipline you,' is because we scared the shit out of them and not because we made a good argument.

Another key tactic shared and promoted by Organizing Committee activists was the targeting of multiple levels of management. Reflecting a cornerstone of IWW organizing strategy, this means that, in addition to launching mass refusals and other local actions, workers collectively addressed higher levels of management where staffing

decisions were actually being made as opposed to merely enforced. Chris's story about the February meeting between workers at Whitemud South and Edmonton Director Richard Thorson, which has been mentioned above, is one example of this strategy as it played out. The first demand from workers to meet with Richard Thorson, however, came from Depot 9 as a follow-up to their mass refusal in late January. The mood of these meetings was confrontational. Workers' used them as a chance to voice their collective grievances and demands to management. Julie reflects on the real sense of power held by workers during one of the meetings called by Whitemud South workers:

I remember one meeting, I think Thorson and Lang was there, and they just were like white as ghosts and shaking, like they just were not happy [laughs]. And they were intimidated, I mean, they had a hundred-and-fifty angry people.

In addition to face-to-face meetings, workers at different depots also issued letters and other written documents to higher levels of management expressing their dissatisfaction with staffing practices and laying out demands for changes to be made.

In all cases, the final decisions regarding any collective actions being undertaken were made by the workers on the floor who participated in those actions and whose lives were directly affected by the course of struggle. The primary mechanism through which rank-and-file workers within a given depot were able to shape the unfolding of direct action was the coffee break meeting. Arising organically and likely influenced by the skills transmitted through the Taking Back the Work-floor course, coffee break meetings came to function throughout the force-back fight as workers' assemblies. They provided a space for discussion, debate, and democratic decision-making. In line with the basic principles of solidarity unionism, the committee was thus rooted within and directly

accountable to the work-floor as opposed to operating in a top-down and representative fashion.

Originally, coffee break meetings took the form of information sessions held on the floor by visiting union executives. However, alongside an increase in workers' mobilization at the point of production, Shop Stewards began to call them in order to host more active discussions on the course of action that workers wished to take. Indeed, the hosting of work-floor meetings prior to the launching of any collective action is reflective of the general pattern of organizing promoted through the committee's direct action course. Over time, as the momentum of the force-back fight began to pick up, different workers in many depots began to call coffee break meetings themselves, without the leadership of Stewards. Julie reflects on the role and development of coffee break meetings at Whitemud South:

[Myself and a fellow Shop Steward] regularly had organized coffee breaks where we would go outside and [we would] stand on a coffee table or whatever, like a soapbox meeting. We'd get up and, you know, say what was happening around the city, that other depots were, you know, aligning and refusing to do force-back and it was sort of almost daily updates. People would yell 'Coffee!' and we'd blow whistles and it was kind of a fun event and we'd go outside and say, 'these depots refused forced overtime, there hasn't been any repercussions, what do you guys wanna do?' ... And it got to the point where people would just yell 'Coffee break meeting!' and we didn't even organize it.

Any plan or strategy developed at the level of the Organizing Committee unfolded on the floor through the mobilization of workers within coffee break meetings. In an important way, this served to strengthen rank-and-file solidarity as the basis of the power of collective direct action. Specifically, as Phinneas notes, coffee break meetings became

a space for democratic decision-making to which workers felt collectively bound by.

Phinneas explains:

[Coffee break meetings] definitely became decision-making bodies and they became bodies that people felt collectively bound by. So, generally speaking, there was a consciousness developed that like, ‘look, even if I’m not in favour of this course of action, I’m gonna abide by it because that’s what mature grownups do in a democracy’ ...

In addition to plans surrounding direct action, even demand letters coming out of the Organizing Committee addressed to higher levels of management were put through local coffee break meetings for ratification.

Another important function of the coffee break meetings was the fostering of collective responsibility which helped to somewhat lessen the exposure of key activists and Shop Stewards to management discipline. For instance, at Whitemud South, Julie and a fellow Shop Steward made an effort to share the responsibility of facilitating coffee break meetings with other activists on the floor, in part as a measure to deflect attention from themselves as organizers. In any case, regardless of how each meeting was facilitated within each depot, the opening up of decision-making to other workers ensured that direct action outside the bounds of labour law was always a collective effort and thus more difficult for management to pin on any one organizer.

Although the development and operation of the Organizing Committee was clearly influenced by Wobblies and other activists pursuing organizing efforts along the lines of solidarity unionism, it would be incorrect to assume that this committee existed as a homogenous entity dominated by any one ideological tendency. Instead, to a large extent, the development of this committee along solidarity unionist lines involved a

process of internal struggle over the principles and tactics of workplace organizing. One of the major points of internal conflict leading to a split within the Organizing Committee revolved around the question amongst activists regarding the merits of pursuing elected positions within the local office. For one group of activists, the bulk of problems associated with the local executive, such as the bottleneck on workers' militancy, were thought to be best addressed through the running of a slate in aims of winning an electoral victory and replacing the existing leadership. For other activists, and IWW dual-carders in particular, the project of seizing political power within the local did not hold out any promise for change due to the structural constraints of formal-legal unionism. According to this group, since such constraints would remain intact regardless of the ideological leanings of the individuals filling executive positions, the best way forward involved a solidarity unionist approach wherein which activist energies would be focused primarily on the fostering of rank-and-file autonomous action.

The fact that the playing out of this debate led to the eventual surfacing of approaches and practices more closely aligned with solidarity unionism is the result of different factors. For one, the ideologically united presence of Wobblies within Edmonton postal depots and their conscious concentration within the Organizing Committee allowed them to influence greatly the culture of organizing on the floor. Don, a long-time union activist working out of Depot 9, comments on the impact of the emergence of local Wobbly networks within the post: "I know there's ... young Wobblies saying to their friends 'I work at Canada Post,' because there are a number of them. ... And I think their presence has certainly made a difference and a lot of them have taken on Shop Steward

positions, so they've affected the union in certain ways." In describing her pathway to employment at the post, Rachael uncovers an informal effort on behalf of Wobblies to build a presence at this particular place of work. She notes: "I got a job at Canada Post because friends of mine in the IWW suggested that I get a job at Canada Post." Speaking to the goals of Wobbly dual-carders, Phinneas explains: "... our approach was to change the culture in the union and the ethic that was driving it." "To a certain degree," he continues, "we concentrated ourselves within the Organizing Committee and the Education Committee because we felt that those were the best ways to do it."

Crucially, however, instead of catching on solely as a result of the number of Wobbly activists and their organizational goals, the leaning of the Organizing Committee in the direction of solidarity unionism also speaks to the extent to which this approach worked for rank-and-filers in their struggles with management. Granted, those wishing to run a slate were never necessarily convinced of the merits of an approach which eschewed this goal. Still, the reality of union bottlenecks made especially evident through the events at Delton in 2007 and the unfolding examples of workers' collective power surrounding the force-back fight seem to have at least contributed toward a broad working agreement within the Organizing Committee. Regardless of each activist's political aims, a high level of importance was attached to the building and sustaining of the alternative networks, educational resources and internal structures serving to place rank-and-file solidarity and direct action at the centre of struggle.

Another major source of tension within the Organizing Committee revolved around the question of the nature and extent of the day-to-day relationship between rank-

and-file organizers and the local executive. Unlike the working agreement which developed around the question of the most effective orientation of workers' struggle, conflicting views on how to relate with the local office on a daily basis created a fundamental split which resulted in the breaking off of a number of activists from the Organizing Committee. Specifically, amongst other various factors, it was this split which paved the way for the creation of a new city-wide committee structure known as the Work-floor Mobilization Committee (WMC).

Underlying the internal conflict leading to the split and creation of the WMC was a particular pattern of interaction developing between the Organizing Committee and the local executive. Owing to the formal existence of the Organizing Committee as a part of the local's official infrastructure, full-time local executives, while often theoretically supportive of workers' militancy on the floor, intervened on different occasions to limit the activities of the committee. As seen in chapter four, the structural constraints of legal unionism tend to compel executive members to police the activities of their membership in favour of sustaining the formal legitimacy and continued existence of the union institution. One example of how this dynamic played out for Organizing Committee activists was the placing of roadblocks by local union executives in the way of the development of the direct action course. As plans for the course passed through official channels, the use of IWW materials in particular caused apprehensions on behalf of many executive members, with many expressing worry that direct action would lead to discipline. While activists from the committee were eventually able to push the course through official channels by stacking the vote at a General Membership Meeting, this was

but one instance in which workers became frustrated with the limiting influence of executive members. Constantly coming up against the influence of the local office, internal tensions developed between activists over the question of how to navigate this situation. For some, it was both possible and expedient to maintain a formal connection to the local while at the same time continuing to develop and facilitate workers' self-organized struggle at the point of production. Others, however, advocated for complete independence from the local office, seeing no benefit and only drawbacks to any continued formal relationship with union executives. Breaking away from the Organizing Committee, this latter group formed the Work-floor Mobilization Committee.

Formed in late February of 2011, during the peak of the force-back fight, the Work-floor Mobilization Committee provided a space for workers who wished to organize completely autonomously from the local. In this sense, its operations were even more closely reflective of the principles of solidarity unionism which stressed workers' self-organization. "The major difference in the Work-floor Mobilization Committee from the Organizing Committee," Phinneas explains, "was the total independence from the local hierarchy." Accordingly, membership within the WMC was explicitly exclusive to non-union officials. The Chair of the Organizing Committee, a Wobbly who was thus sympathetic to rank-and-file autonomy, speaks to his own exclusion from the WMC:

I was supportive of it and I was at a lot of meetings that led to the creation of the Work-floor Mobilization Committee and kind of helped them get their feet and developed people in that committee. But, ultimately, because I was an executive member, I had to step back. ... And, to be honest, I support that.

Although tensions no doubt existed between WMC activists and some of the local executives, the overall sentiment shared within the mobilization committee was not hostile toward the local office. To be sure, there were those who expressed an anti-executive position within the WMC. However, there were also those, such as Julie and Chris, who viewed the development of a completely autonomous structure for rank-and-file organizing as a means of shielding the local from legal discipline. Speaking to the role of the WMC, Julie reflects: “I thought it relieved the local from responsibility because they weren’t involved in it.” For Chris, this distance even appeared to provide some leverage for local executives in their dealings with management. He explains:

... when you have what's seen as, you know, a work floor that's doing its own action ... it empowers the exec. The exec, I know ... for a fact that they could say, 'listen we're not in control of this. We know where it's going so you better do something about it. We've been telling you to do something about it for years. You've been ignoring us, now the work floor is doing their own thing.'

As an example, Chris points to an instance in which he was nearly disciplined as the result of his activities as an organizer during the force-back fight. Accompanying Chris to his disciplinary meeting, local President Bev Ray successfully used the threat of rank-and-file resistance laying beyond her control as a pressure on management to refrain from undertaking disciplinary measures. “Bev was basically saying to them ‘listen,’ and again, here's this whole play, right, where she's like, ‘if you discipline Chris over this ... I can't tell you what, I can't guarantee what the work floor is going to do.’ So here she's playing this wild card, right, where the work floor is acting on its own. And it's brilliant, right?”

Despite the original tensions surrounding the development of the WMC, relations between this new committee and the Organizing Committee were also void of any

significant degree of hostility. Quite the opposite, a significant degree of cooperation marked the relationship between these two committees as they carried on side-by-side with overlapping goals and functions. The supportive efforts of the Chair of the Organizing Committee in developing the structures of the WMC constitute but one example of this cooperative dynamic. Additionally, key resources, and in particular the militant text-list, were shared with the WMC by Organizing Committee activists. Both committees also shared many of the same members, at least as far as non-officials were concerned. Speaking to the relationship between the two committees following the creation of the WMC, Phinneas, a constant member of the Organizing Committee, explains: “... the Organizing Committee kept on functioning and we kinda had a good rapport with the Work-floor Mobilization Committee, where they would take some things on and we would take other things on.”

On top of sharing in the flow of information through the militant text-list, as well as acting, like the Organizing Committee, as a hub for activist strategizing, one of the more significant developments to come out of the WMC was the planning of the February 27th mass meeting. Organized completely outside of formal union channels, this meeting, as discussed above, effectively brought together workers from across the city during the spread of the force-back fight in order to participate in the same exchange of information, inspiration and strategizing which had henceforth taken place within the city-wide committees. Unlike the internal meetings of the WMC though, the mass meeting was also open to all members of the formal union, including executives, even though it was still populated mostly by rank-and-filers. Chaired by members of the WMC and the

Organizing Committee, however, the proceedings of the meeting reflected the democratic structure of these rank-and-file bodies and provided neither special space nor added value to the input of union officials. Therefore, despite some real tensions during the meeting between rank-and-file activists and full-time executives, the plans for moving forward which came out of this discussion were not unduly influenced by the various concerns of executives. Instead, the mass meeting kicked off a wave of intensified ‘illegal’ direct action led by workers on the floor.

Finally, although the activities of the WMC were reflective of a solidarity unionist approach, it is important to highlight that, just like the Organizing Committee, it was never characterized by the dominance of any particular ideological leaning. Instead, the same debate over the merits of running a slate as a focus for activist energies constantly surfaced within the WMC. Ironically, as Phinneas notes, many of those members of the WMC who expressed an anti-executive sentiment and who played an instrumental role in the committee’s total separation from the local were often also vocal supporters of the idea of running a slate. Again, advocates of this approach felt that a change in union leadership held out the promise of transforming the local union’s relationship to workers’ resistance. Here, a more functionally motivated tendency toward solidarity unionist approaches is particularly evident. Although the roadblocks associated with executive members prompted some activists to focus on the goal of gaining access to the levers of formal union power, a desire to spread and sustain the force-back fight compelled them to construct an organizational infrastructure running completely outside of those same official channels.

In addition to the city-wide committees, another layer of rank-and-file networks which played an important role in the unfolding of the fight against force-back was the depot committees. Originally developed and promoted by Organizing Committee members and Wobbly activists along solidarity unionist lines, workers' committees at the depot level provided a space for activists from the same worksite to build the movement on the floor within the context of their unique situations. In developing strategy locally, these committees were tied directly to the Organizing Committee and, later, the Work-floor Mobilization Committee through both the militant text-list as well as a crossover in membership. Through such channels, the two levels of committees shared a dynamic relationship wherein which the facilitation of workers' struggle at local levels was shaped by a similar facilitation on a city-wide level and vice versa. As was the case with the city-wide committees, all plans for collective action developed by activists at a depot level passed through workers' assemblies in the form of coffee break meetings.

Beginning to take root in and around the fall of 2010, depot committees spread unevenly across the city and followed distinct patterns of mobilization owing to the particular conditions for organizing within each unique worksite. The first depot committee to appear on the scene was built up at Depot 9; a depot which, in many ways, took the lead in the force-back fight. According to Mikhail, a Wobbly organizer from the depot, the coming together of a committee of activists on the floor involved a slow process of confidence-building achieved through a long period of small scale direct actions. In particular, one of the major sparks in this wave of militancy was the organizing which took place amongst Relief Letter Carriers in which Mikhail himself

played a key role as both a RLC and a Wobbly dual carder Shop Steward. Facing their own unique staffing issues wherein which management was constantly making mistakes in assigning their routes at the beginning of each work day, RLCs were mobilized to undertake collective actions as a means of changing their working conditions. Mikhail reflects:

... in Depot 9, I started to organize on a small scale with relief carriers first because I knew them best. I was a relief carrier and I was known as a militant Steward. So we began with small scale actions ... we all collectively acted together to solve our problems. And it was all sorts of problems, from like staffing issues to the bosses screwing up.

He describes a march on the boss action undertaken by relief carriers:

We got together at first on the dock and we're like, 'look guys, the staffing has been terrible, it's been taking up hours of our time every day, we're always getting pulled out throughout the day to do something, and it's just gotta end.' And so all of us went to the bosses office, about twenty of us, or fourteen actually, and we were like, 'look, you guys have been screwing up the staffing so hard that it's making our lives miserable, it's making it difficult to do our jobs, we're working overtime because you guys are screwing up every day, it needs to end.' And the boss was like, 'well, we're doing the best we can.' And we were all in there together and we were like, 'no, you're not doing your best, and if you guys aren't good enough, then get the superintendent to do it, and if the superintendant isn't good enough, then get someone in who is competent and can do it.' And the bosses were all sort of ghost white, right? Like, they were scared. Because nobody likes to see twenty individuals against, you know, just a handful of them saying, 'look, this has to change and if it doesn't change, we're gonna escalate in a really serious way.' We all agreed that if the bosses didn't shape up in a couple days that we'd have a picket and everyone agreed to it.

And immediately, the next day, they had a new person on staffing and that was the first big action that Depot 9 had seen in a few years. And when we walked out of there, you know, the whole shop floor was clapping because they knew what was going on.

Following the example of this successful direct action undertaken by the RLCs, different workers across the depot were inspired to undertake further actions as a means to address their common problems. One day after the relief's march on the boss over

staffing, Mikhail recounts, “a few people pulled some of the people who had helped organize this direct action and they said, like, ‘this is good ... we need more of this’” By providing an example of the effectiveness of direct action, some previously skeptical workers who once held less confidence in the benefits of organizing outside the bounds of legal unionism began to shift toward supporting this avenue of resistance. Mikhail explains, “after a long period of small organized actions at Depot 9 ... [workers] built a shop-floor committee ...”

Meeting on a weekly or bi-weekly basis at a nearby restaurant, the committee at Depot 9 provided an informal space for activists to reflect on the situation at their place of work and discuss plans for moving forward. Like the city-wide committees, tensions over the goals and tactics of organizing created a good deal of debate between organizers at the local level. In addition to the familiar argument over the benefits of running a slate, activists also disagreed over the proper role of formal grievance processes within workers’ struggle. However, Mikhail notes that the severe degree of workers’ problems with force-back at Depot 9 provided a basis for their common struggle and contributed toward a common acceptance among activists of the necessity for immediate collective action. Indeed, while all workers across the city faced force-back, most of the workers who participated in this study indicated that carriers at Depot 9 were exposed to the practice at a particularly high rate in comparison to others.

Given their shared goals of pursuing direct action against force-back, the approach of activists within the Depot 9 committee was to facilitate a slow build up in terms of the confrontational and disruptive nature of actions. Speaking to this strategy, Mikhail

explains, “... we tried to keep actions going on a regular clip and an escalating clip.” At first, the committee organized less risky and more symbolic actions, such as button campaigns. Another example is the ‘no-uniform’ days wherein which workers were encouraged to wear t-shirts with images and messages of protest to work as a symbol of their defiance. Don, a worker at Depot 9, reflects on the sentiment behind no-uniform days: “It was just to show we weren’t robots; that we know what’s going on and there are things we’re prepared to do to demonstrate to management that we’re unhappy about it.”

Over time, the committee began to plan more disruptive direct actions in the vein of those previously undertaken by the RLCs. Central to these escalating actions was an effort to bring the depot together through collective coffee break meetings so as to engage the participation of workers who existed outside of both the local and city-wide activist committees. While direct actions were organized to address different issues, discussion at coffee-break meetings eventually became dominated by the common problem of excessive force-back. As workers became better acquainted and more confident with the carrying-out of militant collective actions, the struggle on the floor escalated to the point that, in late January of 2011, Depot 9 became the first depot to launch a mass refusal of forced overtime. As momentum built up for further refusals, the direct communication and coordination of depot committee members with activists organized on a city-wide level enabled for the spread of this momentum across the city.

If Depot 9 played a leading role in the force-back fight, an example of almost the opposite situation was that of Depot 2. While the rise and activities of a shop-floor committee at Depot 2 took on a similar pattern of slow building as seen at Depot 9, the

process was much slower in terms of mobilizing the work-floor to fight directly against force-back. Speaking as a Wobbly organizer, Rachael describes some of her own efforts in helping to develop the committee. As was the case at Depot 9, Rachael reveals that experience with small scale direct actions played an important preliminary role. One of the first of these actions was a march on the boss as part of the wave of actions across Edmonton in solidarity with the Winnipeg wildcat in November 2010. As a member of the Organizing Committee at that time, Rachael recalls:

... I got a call from [an Organizing Committee activist] that was making the rounds and ... encouraging people to organize something ... and I was like, 'okay,' you know, 'this is the push I need.' ... I hadn't been there long enough to build a committee ..., but I had a couple allies that I'd known from before. So ... I copied from a number of labour agitators and I [yelled] 'Help! Help! We're being robbed! The corporation is sacrificing our health and safety for profit!' or something like that. And everybody followed me into the supervisor's office ... and we met with them a while and we did a little chant on the way out ...

According to Rachael, this march on the boss inspired workers in the depot to become more involved in workplace actions. As an organizer, Rachael worked with this growing inspiration on the floor to create relationships and, within a few months after the Winnipeg solidarity action, she and some fellow activists had formed a committee. Like the activists at Depot 9, the approach taken by organizers within the Depot 2 committee was one of slow building and escalating actions. However, the nature of this escalation and the content of these actions reflected the particular conditions faced by workers at Depot 2.

First off, workers at Depot 2 shared a history of fairly excessive force-back under particularly difficult supervisors which led to a period of extreme tensions on the floor

between workers and management as well as between workers themselves. For many carriers, these past experiences caused a certain reluctance to engage directly in any sort of conflict surrounding staffing practices. In particular, Rachael highlights the lasting impact of conflicts between workers on the floor. She recounts:

Force-back was rampant and people were at each other's throats, people were fighting and the supervisors were assholes and workers were being jerks to each other. So I think that [was] something that we definitely encountered was an increased lookout for the return of that kind of dynamic. That's what a lot of people at my depot were concerned about. ... it was interesting ... how it brought up stories, you know, from the past of when people were fighting each other.

Secondly, a change in supervisors and management practices within Depot 2 meant that staffing was actually slightly better for these workers in comparison to other depots by the time the force-back fight began to develop. Under such conditions, many workers were generally willing to accept what amounted to more occasional instances of force-back as a frustrating yet ultimately tolerable aspect of their jobs.

For a long time then, actions planned by the Depot 2 committee were oriented toward solidarity with other depots as opposed to the undertaking of mass refusals. Still, such solidarity actions were organized in an escalating fashion, serving to build the confidence and militancy of workers. Rachael reflects:

... initially, ours was a position of solidarity with other people. ... one of the first things we did was a petition and then we did a couple marches on the boss where we addressed the supervisor and then I think the manager. Oh yeah, and we did [an action] where the supervisor was giving a staff talk and we turned our backs on him.

While the motivations of workers at Depot 2 to undertake increasingly confrontational job actions as a show of solidarity with workers in other stations cannot

be boiled down to any simple explanation, the role of coffee breaks appears to have been particularly significant. Made possible by the flow of information through the city-wide committees into the depot committees, coffee break meetings provided a space for workers to discuss developments taking place in other stations. For workers in Depot 2, this no doubt created a sense of participation in a wider struggle that they had not yet directly engaged with themselves. Rachael explains:

... we were having lots of coffee break meetings. That was a big thing too. And, you know, most of the staff break meetings were sort of telling people the updates from the other depots, what was going on. And *they really were key for getting people engaged and feeling like they were part of it ...*

Following a long period of escalating solidarity actions and increasing participation from workers on the floor, Depot 2 finally held their own mass refusal in late February. Inspired by the events of the February 27th mass meeting, depot committee activists and their fellow workers from Depot 2 decided to call for a depot-wide force-back refusal. In this case, the original push for a full-out refusal actually came from workers outside the local committee with committee members merely playing a facilitating role on the floor. Rachael recounts:

I think that we had almost ten people from my depot come [to the mass meeting] And we had a little mini Depot 2 pow-wow after the meeting and they were like ‘we gotta refuse tomorrow, let’s do it!’ And I was like, ‘okay guys, if that’s something you’re sure about ...’ and they said ‘yeah, yeah, let’s do it!’ So Monday we just spread the word and the message was, you know, it’s your choice, but know that you’re doing this not just for yourself, you’re supporting the fight across the city, and that we have word that if you’re refusing on health and safety grounds you’re chances of getting disciplined are much lower. ... And so we weren’t telling anyone to refuse, we were asking them to please consider refusing.

Reflecting on the successes of the committee’s mobilizing efforts, Rachael continues, “... it was that week that there were refusals and mail was just being left and our supervisors were just totally powerless ...”

In viewing the development and activities of local shop-floor committees at Depot 9 and Depot 2, two examples are provided which reveal, on one level, the important role played by this layer of rank-and-file organization in the coordination of struggle and, on another level, the crucial influence of the particular conditions within each worksite on the path of workers’ mobilization. In both cases, and here they are representative of the developments within all depots across the city, depot committees pursued organizing along solidarity unionist lines by facilitating a slow build up of direct actions which fostered workers’ confidence in their own collective power. Further, the locally-inspired strategizing of the depot committees found life only through the coffee-break workers’ assemblies which served to engage and unite workers within the depot around common issues while also connecting them to the struggles of carriers at other worksites.

Thus far, in seeking to better understand the main factors influencing the rise of the force-back fight, special attention has been paid to the important role played by worker-run committees practicing solidarity unionism. However, despite this important role, participation in collective direct action did not flow inevitably from the activities of workers’ committees and the holding of shop-floor meetings. Instead, different workers interacted in different ways with the struggle unfolding on the shop-floor owing, in large part, to the playing out of particular social dynamics within the workplace.

For a wide variety of reasons, not all workers decided to take part in mass refusals or other direct actions. Moreover, among those who did not participate in these forms of collective resistance, attitudes toward those who did ranged from hostility to support. To a significant degree, workers' apprehension and even hostility toward direct action was tied to perceived levels of risk associated with such activity. Namely, many workers were afraid of the prospects of management discipline, including the possibility of job termination. Thus, as Rachael observes, the carrying-out of successful direct actions accompanied by a lack of management discipline contributed toward a general shift which saw, on one hand, hostile workers becoming less hostile and even more supportive and, on the other, more apprehensive workers becoming directly involved in future actions. Reflecting on how this dynamic unfolded in her own depot, Rachel recounts: "The beauty of it was, once we [refused] once and it was kind of proven that nobody was getting disciplined for it, then it was sort of like, hey, I don't wanna do force-back either [laughs]."

In addition to and overlapping with perceived levels of risk, the orientation of workers toward shop-floor struggle was also greatly influenced by workers' experiences related to age and the specific social dynamics between younger and older carriers. First off, as discussed in chapter three, younger workers were disproportionately exposed to force-back, largely as a result of the obtaining of medical notes by their older peers which exempted the latter from performing these duties. In a sense, two loose periods can be observed in terms of how this disproportionate allocation of force-back affected the social dynamics between these groups of workers. One, from about 2006 to 2009, was

characterized by high levels of tension and hostility underscored by the resentment of younger carriers. Julie speaks to this situation as it unfolded at Delton:

It's hard for new people to see that these guys have been doing this for twenty-five years and their body's breaking down and maybe they can't do that eight hours and you just think well, don't be a pussy, you know, I'm doing it so you should be doing it too. And so lots of us new guys were mad because we'd get forced back, like I said, everyday for, you know, two weeks consecutively every day and they're still going home at 11:30 in the morning. You know, he finished his own route but refused overtime, right? There was a lot of angry people. people would call people like fat and lazy, like, you fat fuck, why aren't you doing this? Like, why do you have a note? It was tense. People were pretty angry.

Then, during the force-back fight in 2011, the direction of tensions was in some ways reversed. During this period, younger carriers tended to shift their attention away from the relative working conditions of their older fellow workers in favour of undertaking collective action. At the same time, a number of older carriers with doctor's notes were vocally unsupportive of the force-back fight. Speaking to his experiences at Depot 9, Don describes the sentiment of some of these older workers as being "cynical and negative" of the force-back fight, with those planning and participating in the mass refusals being viewed as "malcontented young people who are ... spoiled and who don't know what a hard day's work is like." While the roots of such hostility are likely varied, an important role was likely played by the distance of older carriers with exemption notes from the realities of the working conditions of younger workers facing force-back.

However, although those older workers who voiced their opposition to the activities of "spoiled" younger workers may have been distanced from the latter's experiences on the job, it was never the case that they supported management's use of forced overtime. Don explains: "... they agreed with the young people about the problem

[of force-back], I guess they initially disagreed with them about the way to solve the problem.” Thus, according to Don, most of these older workers who at once opposed the refusals began to voice their support for this course of action in the wake of its success in changing staffing practices.

Despite the disproportionate exposure of younger workers to force-back, many older carriers without doctor’s notes found themselves in the same position as younger workers. Further, a number of older carriers participated actively in mass refusals and the shop-floor struggle of 2011. For instance, Mikhail notes that the Depot 9 activist committee was split half and half between younger carriers with five years or less seniority and older carriers who had closer to thirty years of seniority. In Mikhail’s assessment, this split in ages actually strengthened the committee, allowing for a wealth of experience to be shared in terms of work-floor organizing and also providing the opportunity for strategizing around direct actions which were more likely to gain the participation of a wider section of workers.

At the same time, Mikhail reflects on how the different experiences and situations of older workers with closer to thirty years seniority tended, in some places, to lessen their proclivities toward direct action. Here, apprehensions related to the risk of discipline overlapped with the influence of age. Mikhail reflects: “I’ve only been five years at the post office, like if I lose my job I can maybe do something else. Like, it’s not the end of the road for me, but if you’re thirty years at the post office, you can’t afford to get fired.” Again, however, according to Mikhail, the examples provided of the successful carrying-out of direct actions as well as a slow build up in terms of their disruptive nature seems to

have worked in many places to motivate workers in this position to become more involved.

While age-related dynamics contributed, at least in part, to a more uneasy spread of direct action, the playing-out of other social dynamics had the opposite effect. For example, a shift in the gendered composition of postal depots within Edmonton marked by an increase in the ratio of female to male employees appears to have aided in the rise of a culture of solidarity on the floor. Speaking to this demographic shift, Don observes: “At one point, we had more women Letter Carriers in Edmonton than men and that was sort of unusual in terms of Canada in general but Edmonton for some reason had—more than 50% of the Letter Carriers were women at one point in time.” Further, he notes a change in workplace culture as a result of this shift:

... as more women came into the workplace, and I think in particular this new generation of women in the workplace, ... it has increased the solidarity among workers in the workplace. The women somehow introduce this more humane quality, or, they're better at addressing issues that are emotionally sensitive and doing it in a way that doesn't alienate people.

Speaking specifically within the context of work-floor organizing, Rachael notes a similar dynamic of increased solidarity tied to the organizational activities of women:

... it's kind of a generalization to make, but I think that women often, because we're kind of socialized differently, are able to get the social picture pretty quickly but men might, in general, approach it slightly differently. I think women are just a little more aware of the dynamics and that is a really good skill in organizers, to be aware of the tone.

Further, she highlights the important role played by women during the force-back fight within her depot: “... that time I got called into the manager's office, the people that were all with me were women, you know? [They have been] the ones who have really kinda

taken some of the initiatives and, so, yeah. I don' know if that makes Edmonton special but that has been a very important component of how we organize.”

In exploring the events and developments of the 2011 fight against force-back, the purpose of this chapter has been to offer a glimpse into the successful organizing efforts of postal workers in Edmonton who built their own structures of resistance and pursued activities outside the realm of formal-legal unionism in order to address their collective interests in the face of neoliberal restructuring. Central to the unfolding of this direct action campaign was the influence of solidarity unionism as a mode of union praxis stressing the cultivation of rank-and-file networks of mutual support over a reliance on legalistic and bureaucratic processes which tend to hinder workers' militancy.

Guided by this approach, worker-run committees were constructed at city-wide and depot-wide levels to facilitate and coordinate collective direct action from the bottom-up. While IWW dual-carders played a crucial role in the development of this struggle along solidarity unionist lines, participation in these efforts by other activists and workers of various leanings reflects the functional character of this approach; it worked as a means of organizing to directly address workers' issues. Finally, however, workers' participation in confrontational struggle did not arise naturally or inevitably simply owing to the activities of worker-run committees practicing solidarity unionism. The particular way in which this direct action campaign unfolded was also a reflection of the playing-out of various social dynamics on the floor. No neat-and-ready blueprint for successful organizing can be drawn from the example of the force-back fight. It is the story of how a particular group of workers at a particular place of work broke with conventional

unionism and relied primarily on the power of their own solidarity to shape their lives as workers.

CONCLUSION

The departure of Edmonton postal workers from the entrenched channels of formal labour relations and their movement toward solidarity unionism reflects, to a large extent, a growing reality facing the Canadian labour movement: the post-WWII labour compromise has broken down. While the winning of collective bargaining rights for private and public sector workers once provided a large section of labour with a tool to carve out significant gains leading to the emergence of employment relationships characterized by high levels of commitment, the deepening of neoliberalism as a political project to restore corporate profits has weakened the bargaining position of labour and facilitated an erosion of commitments and the Standard Employment Relationship (SER).

The shift toward a neoliberal corporate offensive has served to reveal some of the significant costs for organized labour attached to the formal institutionalization of industrial relations under the Canadian capitalist state. Through the introduction of management rights clauses and the imposition of tight restrictions on the exercising of workers' collective power, unions have been steered away from challenging management's control over the labour process. Union executives have been structurally compelled to police the activities of their membership in aims of quelling militancy and retaining the legitimacy and survival of unions. Operating within such constraints, the labour movement has been fairly powerless to address the concessionary bargaining

strategies and disruptive workplace restructuring programs which characterize the current climate of labour relations.

It is especially indicative of the contemporary predicament of the Canadian labour movement that postal workers in particular decided to develop their own networks of resistance at a distance from the local union. Indeed, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers has historically been a more militant union at the forefront of workers' struggles across the country. Playing an essential role in the extension of collective bargaining rights to public sector workers and displaying, to a certain extent, a willingness on behalf of rank-and-filers and even executive members to defy labour law, CUPW was able to secure gains for its members which set new precedents for the SER. The extent of commitments secured for postal workers even surpassed the entrenched principle of management's control over production with the introduction in the 1970's of contract language designed to protect workers from the negative effects of technological change.

Today, a quasi-private Canada Post Corporation which has been placed on a path toward full privatization by successive governments is driven by an agenda of cost-cutting and profit maximization which has altered significantly the nature of the employment relationship at the post. Through the interrelated corporate strategies of forced overtime and Modern Post restructuring, management has pursued a program of job elimination and increased productivity which has meant, among other things, an intensification of workloads. Interview discussions with Edmonton postal workers point toward an increase in *employment relationship uncertainty* and *employment relationship*

effort under such conditions, as well as an erosion of *employment relationship support*. They face a situation of weakening commitments.

Functioning within the bounds of industrial legality, the response of CUPW officials to the current challenges facing their membership has been too little, too late. A reliance on time-consuming formal grievance procedures as a means to address disruptive technological changes under the Modern Post or the ‘proper’ contractual use of forced overtime has left many workers feeling impatient and distanced from the course of their struggle. The difficult position of executive members as the official representatives of the union within a highly regulated labour relations system has conferred upon them various incentives to direct and contain the activities of their membership away from ‘illegal’ avenues of resistance. In Edmonton, this situation provided the context for the influence of IWW dual-carders and, more specifically, the praxis of solidarity unionism which they introduced.

The story of the fight against force-back in 2011 holds out some important lessons for the labour movement regarding the effectiveness of solidarity unionism. While this struggle developed in particular ways owing to the particular conditions of workers from a particular place of work, it is, nonetheless, living testament to the power and dynamism of workers’ self-organized resistance at the point of production. However, the tough question stands out as to where to go from here. Should formal-legal unionism be abandoned entirely in favour of cultivating direct action? There is no doubt that unions are currently trapped under the weight of a capitalist labour relations system. Moreover, the struggles of any particular group of workers practicing solidarity unionism are not

likely extend too far if the dominant trend within the wider labour movement is one of commitment to entrenched legal channels.

But what would it look like to build a working class movement rooted in rank-and-file direct action? While the future is never written, an historical tradition of revolutionary unionism, in which the IWW has played a significant role, holds out the model of a decentralized federated network of rank-and-file resistance. Just as direct action was coordinated by over-lapping depot- and city-wide committees in Edmonton, worker-run committees could extend outside of specific workplaces to unite workers across industries, regions, and even nations. In addition to mobilizing cross-industrial solidarity to expand workers' gains in the immediate term, the building up of such a power base might also provide a space for the articulation and execution of a more radical political program. The unfolding of neoliberalism could thus be met by a working class mobilized to challenge directly the forces of private capital which lay at its roots.

APPENDIX – METHODOLOGY

The primary research for this study consists of seven separate interviews with seven different Edmonton postal workers. The interviews were held at a public library in downtown Edmonton. All steps taken in setting up and conducting the interviews as well as in transcribing and working with the interview data have been pursuant of the standards and review processes of the McMaster Research Ethics Board.

Interviewees found their way into this study by direct e-mail invitation from the researcher. E-mail contacts were provided to the researcher by a primary contact who is an Edmonton postal worker and who took part in the study as an interviewee. The primary contact was established face-to-face. All those who shared their e-mail address with the primary contact provided their consent to be e-mailed by the researcher for the purpose of inviting their participation in the study.

Prior to taking part in the study, all interviewees were provided with a letter of information regarding the nature and purpose of the study and signed an attached statement of consent. In order to mitigate any risks associated with the revealing of any individual's identity, interviewee's were made aware that their real names would not be used, unless they communicated otherwise. Interviewees were also provided a copy of their interview transcript in order to review all of their stories and comments, so as to

ensure that no undue revealing of their identity would result from the public release of this data.

Interviewees were also made aware that they held no obligation to take part in the study and that they were free to withdraw their participation at any time.

In addition to interview data, this study has relied upon the primary data of government publications and legal documents. Full references can be found in the bibliography.

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