

September 30, 1998

JOHN E. POTTER
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, LABOR RELATIONS

SUBJECT: Supervisor Knowledge of Union Contracts
(LM-MA-98-001)

During an audit of the grievance-arbitration procedures¹ for United States Postal Service (USPS) bargaining employees, you asked that we determine whether supervisors have the necessary knowledge and information to fulfill their responsibilities in administering the union contracts. This report contains our observations in this area, which are based on interviews with 169 supervisors and 15 labor relations specialists from 10 districts.² These interviews were conducted during May and June, 1998.

Results in Brief

The surveys of USPS supervisors disclosed that only 42 percent of those interviewed rated themselves as “extremely” or “very” knowledgeable of union contracts. Eighty-three percent of the supervisors considered themselves to be “self-taught.” Of those supervisors who had and could remember the dates of formal training, 30 percent indicated that such training predated the current national contracts, and 20 percent reported it to be 10 years old.

Supervisors also conveyed that they had not received grievance settlements, arbitration decisions, and other interpretive guidance that would have been instrumental in clarifying contract provisions and ensuring consistent contract administration. Without a good understanding of the union contracts, supervisors told us they believe that they

¹ Audit results will be issued in a series of reports, the first of which will be released in fiscal year 1999.

² The Districts visited were Boston, Cincinnati, Columbia, Fort Worth, Gateway, Long Island, Pittsburgh, San Antonio, Springfield and Tennessee.

are at a disadvantage in managing labor relations on the workroom floor and in negotiating grievance settlements with union representatives. We believe a better understanding of the union contracts can help supervisors avoid actions that give rise to grievances and would facilitate resolution of more grievances at earlier stages of the process.

Background

Most USPS craft employees are represented by one of four unions, the (1) American Postal Workers Union, (2) National Association of Letter Carriers, (3) National Postal Mail Handlers Union, or (4) National Rural Letter Carriers' Association. Every four years a separate national agreement or contract is negotiated with each union, and contract provisions outline the terms and conditions of employment for employees in that union. In addition, three of the four unions allow for agreements to be negotiated at the local level relating to matters on local conditions of employment. The terms of the local contracts vary. The union contracts also establish grievance-arbitration procedures that provide employees and unions a means to resolve complaints concerning USPS' administration of the union contracts.

Putting the agreements into practice at the operating level (contract administration) and grievance resolution are primarily the responsibilities of supervisors. To fulfill these responsibilities, supervisors must have a good understanding of both the national and applicable local agreements. The USPS Supervisor's Guide to Handling Grievances emphasizes that in order to properly respond to grievances, supervisors need to be familiar with applicable union contract provisions, outcomes of prior similar cases, and any information relating to applicable policies. It advises supervisors to consult grievance settlements and arbitrator's decisions, which form the predominant basis for clarifying and interpreting USPS' contracts with its unions. Grievance-arbitration decisions also provide supervisors with feedback on the impact of their decisions and the appropriateness of their actions in dealing with workplace disputes relating to the union contracts. As a result, these decisions are key to effective contract administration.

Observations

Of the 169 supervisors we interviewed, only 42 percent indicated that they were “extremely” or “very” knowledgeable of national and local union contracts. The remaining 58 percent rated their knowledge as “average” or “limited.” Survey results confirmed that individuals temporarily detailed to supervisory positions (“204-B” supervisors)³ frequently were the least knowledgeable of the union contracts. Additionally, when asked why grievances were not settled at Steps 1 and 2, 60 percent of the labor relations specialists we interviewed told us that supervisors’ lack of understanding of the union contracts was a factor. A labor relations specialist in one district also attributed contractual grievances to the actions of “204-B” supervisors who unknowingly violated the union contracts.

Eighty-three percent of the supervisors we interviewed considered themselves to be “self-taught” or otherwise acquired their contractual knowledge through on-the-job experiences. The remaining 17 percent indicated that they had some formal training, but considered a significant portion of their knowledge to be based on reading books and manuals and on-the-job experiences. Thirty percent of the supervisors who had and could remember the dates of their formal training told us that such training predated the current national contracts, and 20 percent reported it to be 10 years old.

Forty percent of supervisors interviewed also told us that they had not received grievance settlements, arbitration decisions, and other interpretive guidance that would have been instrumental in clarifying contract provisions and ensuring consistent contract administration.⁴ At each district we visited, one or more supervisors told us that they had not been apprised of the outcome of grievances for which they were responsible. Communicating grievance outcomes highlights actions that could have been taken at the operational level to resolve grievances. Supervisors that we interviewed were generally not aware of, and did not have

³ Although we did not determine what percentage of supervisors interviewed were “204-Bs,” we believe the percentage to be small based on the years of supervisory experience reported by each supervisor.

access to, the USPS' national database of grievance-arbitration decisions. This database, which provides outcomes of prior grievance cases, is used by labor relations personnel to negotiate grievance settlements and to prepare for arbitration hearings. These supervisors expressed a desire for interpretive guidance on the union contracts because they believe the contracts are overly complex or unclear in some areas.

Ten percent of the supervisors who told us they did not have a good understanding of union contracts also believed that they were at a disadvantage in managing labor relations on the workroom floor and in negotiating grievance settlements with union representatives. Ten percent of the supervisors who told us they did not have a good understanding of union contracts also told us that they felt disadvantaged when confronted with union stewards that had, in their opinions, superior training on union contract language and who were armed with national strategies for dealing with specific contract issues⁵. One supervisor observed that union stewards are required to understand only their union's contract, while supervisors are required to understand the provisions of at least two or more contracts depending on the union affiliation of employees assigned to their facilities and the number of local agreements. A better understanding of the union contracts can help supervisors avoid actions that give rise to grievances and facilitate resolution of grievances at earlier stages of the process.

Suggestions

Based on our observations, we suggest that you initiate the following actions:

1. Assess the training needs of supervisors, and where necessary, develop and provide formal training on union contracts.
2. Develop and distribute contract interpretive guidance to supervisors.
3. Inform supervisors of grievance outcomes for cases that they have been involved in and use the rationale for

⁴ The remaining 60 percent of the supervisors interviewed did not identify the lack of interpretive guidance as a barrier to effective contract administration.

⁵ This represents the views of USPS supervisors. We did not assess the training received by USPS supervisors or that received by union representatives.

decisions as a continuous learning opportunity.

**Management
Comments**

USPS officials agreed with the intent of our suggestions and stated the following:

Suggestion 1: The headquarters Labor Relations department developed a four-hour labor relations course for supervisors that will be delivered during fiscal year 1999. The training is in support of the key strategies and values to improve supervisor and manager people skills, and concentrates on employee treatment, contract compliance and communication. Designed into the course is a section whereby local contractual issues of concern are addressed. Management further stated that this is the first national labor relations training program designed at the Headquarters level for supervisors and managers.

Suggestion 2: Management noted that the USPS and NALC developed a Joint Contract Administration Manual, which was distributed nationwide to all delivery units in June 1998. Management also stated they are presently attempting to reach agreement with the APWU on developing a similar manual.

Suggestion 3: Management stated that there are two ongoing labor relations training programs for Labor Relations Specialists. In both of these courses Labor Relations Specialists are advised of the necessity to inform supervisors when a grievance is sustained either by a Labor Relations Representative or an Arbitrator. In addition to emphasizing the above in future training classes, management stated they will issue instructions to Field Labor Relations Specialists on this issue.

A copy of management's verbatim comments on the draft version of this report is included as Appendix 1.

**Evaluation of
Management
Comments**

Management's comments are generally responsive to the issues and suggestions identified in this report. Management's efforts to develop and distribute contract interpretive guidance to supervisors should be expanded to include the National Postal Mail Handlers Union and the National Rural Letter Carriers' Association.

If you have any questions about this report, please call [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] or me at (703) 248-2300.

Sincerely yours,

Billy Sauls
Assistant Inspector General
for Employee

Attachment

cc: John R. Gunnels
Alan B. Kiel

Major contributors to this advisory were:

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]