



COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
WASHINGTON D.C. 20548

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JANUARY 18, 1982

RELEASED

The Honorable John Napier
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Napier:

RESTRICTED -- Not to be released outside the General Accounting Office except on the basis of specific approval by the Office of Congressional Relations.

Subject: Management/Employee Relations Problems
at the Bennettsville, South Carolina,
Post Office (GGD-82-35)

As requested by your letter of July 22, 1981, we have reviewed management/employee relations problems at the Bennettsville, South Carolina, Post Office. As agreed, we compiled information on incidents which led to employee grievances and determined the disposition of such grievances.

OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND
METHODOLOGY

To obtain the desired information, we reviewed files for all grievances made by postal craft employees during fiscal years 1979, 1980, and 1981. To supplement information in the files, we interviewed

- the Postmaster, the supervisor, and 12 of the 15 regular postal craft employees (7 city carriers, 3 rural carriers, and 2 clerks) of the Bennettsville Post Office;
- the Manager and other officials of the Management Sectional Center (MSC) 1/ in Florence, South Carolina; and
- the Manager of the Postal Service's Carolina District Office in Charlotte, North Carolina.

1/A designated postal facility whose manager has full management responsibility for all post offices within an assigned ZIP Code area.

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NUMBER OF GRIEVANCES AND
THEIR DISPOSITION

For a 6-year period ending September 30, 1981, Postal Service records show that Bennettsville postal craft employees filed 76 grievances. Two grievances were filed in 1976 and 74 were filed during fiscal years 1979, 1980, and 1981 (4 in fiscal year 1979, 25 in fiscal year 1980, and 45 in fiscal year 1981). A schedule showing the number of grievances by fiscal year and by employee is enclosed. All of the grievances filed in fiscal years 1979, 1980, and 1981 had been filed by city carriers; 19 were class action grievances and 55 were filed by individual city carriers. Forty-three of the 55 individual grievances were filed by two city carriers. As of October 1981, over 70 percent of the 74 grievances had been resolved--8 sustained, 19 by a negotiated settlement, and 28 denied.

We found that grievance activity at Bennettsville is extremely high relative to the activity at other post offices under the jurisdiction of the Florence MSC. From January 1979 to September 1981, grievances filed by the Bennettsville city carriers have accounted for about 46 percent of the total grievances appealed to the Florence MSC, which has management responsibility for 54 post offices with more than 650 employees.

ATTEMPTS TO INCREASE PRODUCTIVITY
CAUSED GRIEVANCES

About one-third of the grievances concerned incidents occurring during count and carrier route inspections made by the Florence MSC employees. Such inspections are periodically made at post offices to determine if carriers are following standard operating procedures in sorting and delivering mail and if the time required to complete a route is justified by workload. The underlying objective is to improve postal efficiency. Inspections of carrier operations at Bennettsville have resulted in management being criticized for not adequately controlling city carrier operations and for the post office's failure to stay within its budgeted workhours. In turn, such criticism resulted in Bennettsville management taking actions which caused employee grievances. The evolution of the environment which led to the tremendous increase in grievance activity is indicated by the following chronology.

In May 1979, the Florence MSC made count and route inspections at Bennettsville but determined that the results could not be used to adjust routes because of extensive noncompliance with standard operating procedures and commingling of routes. The inspection team attributed the noncompliance to lax management of city carrier operations and scheduled another inspection for the week of October 11 to allow time for management to correct the deficiencies.

On October 2, 1979, Florence MSC officials visited the post office to determine if it was ready for the count and route inspection scheduled to start on October 11. The inspection team concluded that the post office was in no better shape for inspection than before and that management was still allowing city carriers to perform their duties as they pleased. Bennettsville management was told to improve supervision and, if warranted, take appropriate disciplinary action against employees for non-compliance with standard operating procedures.

During the week of October 17, the MSC inspection team made count and route inspections which resulted in route adjustments and the issuance of letters of warning and a 7-day suspension for procedural violations. The supervisor and three city carriers received letters of warning, and one city carrier was suspended.

According to most Bennettsville employees we interviewed, management/employee relations began declining after these actions. The Postmaster said that relations with the city carriers began to worsen and their productivity declined following a visit on January 3, 1980, by an official from the National Association of Letter Carriers who expressed dissatisfaction with management's treatment of city carriers.

On January 31, 1980, Florence MSC officials visited the Bennettsville Post Office and again reported that management did not have control over city carrier operations. By letter dated February 4, 1980, the Manager of the Florence MSC told the Postmaster that Bennettsville had the highest percentage overrun of carrier workhours of any post office under his jurisdiction. The Manager emphasized that all offices were expected to operate within their budgets and that the Postmaster should take actions to bring the Bennettsville carrier operation back into line.

In October 1980, the Florence MSC decided that the Bennettsville Post Office should participate in the Model Delivery Office Program. The objectives of this program are to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of delivery services based on findings of a delivery service audit and on count and route inspections.

The delivery service audit was completed by an inspection team from the Florence MSC in January 1981. However, the count and route inspections were canceled on March 16 before they were completed. Carriers were performing so many functions contrary to standard operating procedures and demonstrated that they needed remedial training to such an extent that to continue the inspection would be of no benefit. The team concluded that it would be impossible to adjust routes fairly using information from the inspection. Florence MSC again criticized the performance of both management and craft employees, and letters of warning were issued to three city carriers. One carrier received two letters.

In April 1981, a seven-member team from the Florence MSC provided remedial training to the Bennettsville city carriers, and the suspended count and route inspections were completed in May. In November 1981, the Bennettsville Post Office was certified as a Model Delivery Unit.

PROSPECTS FOR IMPROVED
MANAGEMENT/EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

The MSC's desire for higher productivity and better compliance with standard operating procedures at the Bennettsville Post Office led to conflicts between management and the city carriers. It was not within the scope of our work to assess whether these desires (for higher productivity and better compliance with standard operating procedures) were justified or not. Therefore, we cannot conclude whether management's actions or employees' reactions were inappropriate.

However, the prospects for improved management/employee relations at Bennettsville are not good unless employees accept that management is within its rights to establish and require compliance with standard operating procedures. On the other hand, management must ensure that employees understand the procedures and the necessity for compliance. Apparently, this responsibility has not been fulfilled at Bennettsville. For example, four appeals of disciplinary actions resulting from the October 1979 count and route inspections were sustained in arbitration on the grounds that due process was not followed in issuing the disciplinary actions. In deciding these cases, the arbitrator found that it was clear that standard operating procedures had been violated, but that it was also clear that the employees had not been given clear and explicit instructions. The arbitrator's decision, dated March 31, 1980, stated that due process requires that the employee be told what he/she is doing wrong, be given assistance in correcting the procedure violated, and be given time to make the correction--actions which had not been taken in these cases.

The finding in March 1981, almost 1 year after the arbitrator's decision that carriers needed remedial training in standard operating procedures (see p. 3), indicates that Bennettsville management did little following the arbitrator's ruling to ensure that carriers were knowledgeable of standard operating procedures. The remedial training provided to carriers in April 1981 by the MSC apparently corrected this deficiency and enabled Bennettsville to meet the requirements of the Model Delivery Program.

Whether labor and management at Bennettsville will ever work in harmony without personnel changes remains uncertain. Personal differences will have to be set aside and a cooperative spirit

founded on trust and understanding must be developed and sustained by management and labor. It should be pointed out that the Bennettsville Post Office is apparently not the only post office with labor/management problems. Recognizing a need to improve relationships, the Postmaster General, in October 1981, assigned a Senior Assistant Postmaster General responsibility for planning and initiating a process to improve the relations between management and labor. The Postmaster General, in taking this action, said he believed the future success of the Postal Service depends in a large part upon creating and sustaining a climate of increased communication, mutual trust, and improved understanding.

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A draft of this report was reviewed by the Bennettsville Postmaster, the MSC Manager, and by labor relations officials at Postal Service Headquarters. The MSC Manager and the Assistant Postmaster General, Labor Relations Department, believe that labor/management problems at Bennettsville are unique to that office and not representative of other post offices in the Florence MSC area. The MSC Manager also informed us that he and his staff visited the Bennettsville Post Office and opened a dialogue between management and employees. He believes that labor/management relations are improving.

As agreed, we will send copies of this report to the Postmaster General and to officials directly responsible for improving management/employee relations at Bennettsville.

We would be pleased to meet with you should you have any questions on the report.

Sincerely yours,



William J. Anderson
Director

Enclosure

NUMBER OF GRIEVANCES BY FISCAL YEAR
AND BY EMPLOYEE

<u>EMPLOYEE</u>	<u>FY</u> <u>1979</u>	<u>FY</u> <u>1980</u>	<u>FY</u> <u>1981</u>	<u>Total</u>
A	1	9 (1)	15 (3)	25 (4)
B		2 (1)		2 (1)
C		2 (1)	1	3 (1)
D		3 (2)	15 (4)	18 (6)
E		2	1	3
F		1	1	2
G		1 (1)	1 (1)	2 (2)
Class action	<u>3</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>19</u>
Total	<u>4</u>	<u>25</u> (6)	<u>45</u> (8)	<u>74</u> (14)

Note: Appeals of disciplinary actions are shown in parentheses.