

TESTIMONY OF
WILLIAM BURRUS, PRESIDENT-ELECT

AMERICAN POSTAL WORKERS UNION, AFL-CIO

ON

“TERRORISM THROUGH THE MAIL;
PROTECTING THE POSTAL WORKERS
AND THE PUBLIC”

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS,
AND THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INTERNATIONAL SECURITY, PROLIFERATION
AND FEDERAL SERVICE
UNITED STATES SENATE

OCTOBER 30, 2001

Hello, Mr. Chairman, and members of the committee. Thank you very much for providing this forum to discuss the enormous crisis faced by this country and, in particular, by the United States Postal Service. As you know, this matter is a matter of life or death for postal workers.

The American Postal Workers Union represents approximately 380,000 employees of the United States Postal Service. Our members work in every State and Territory of the United States. The fact that these men and women have continued to work in the Post Office since anthrax was first discovered in the mail has been nothing short of heroic. I am proud, and humbled, to be representing them before you today. In the face of unknown and potentially deadly danger, they have been determined and steadfast in the performance of their duties.

The September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon was unspeakably horrible, and it has changed our country in ways that are very profound. The subsequent attack on our

country by the use of anthrax – and that is what is, an attack on our country – is also likely to have a profound effect on our country.

Certainly, its effect on postal workers, the American Postal Workers Union, and the United States Postal Service, has already been profound. The deaths of two postal workers and the hospitalization of numbers of others has tested the commitment of postal workers to their work, and to the mission of the Postal Service. It also has tested the commitment of the Postal Service to the welfare of its workers.

I want to emphasize that, despite the deaths and injuries that have occurred, the American Postal Workers Union and the United States Postal Service have approached these tragedies and these challenges together. We are not blaming anyone for the harm done to postal employees and the Postal Service except those terrorists or other criminals who intended to cause death and serious bodily harm by sending anthrax through the mail.

The United States Postal Service accounts for approximately eight percent of Gross Domestic Product, and it delivers messages

and packages to every home in America. For 200 years, it has bound this country together by providing universal service at a uniform and affordable price. It is the best, the most efficient, and the least expensive Postal Service in the world. In short, it is an institution that has enormous, in fact incalculable, value to this country. That value is measured not only in economic terms, but in social terms. Despite the power and sophistication of the Internet, it is still only the United States Postal Service that touches every life in America. As an article in the Wall Street Journal recently stated, "Even a temporary disruption in the distribution of letters and packages due to the anthrax scare could be yet another blow at a time when recession seems at hand."

Immediately when anthrax was discovered in postal facilities, postal officials consulted promptly, and at length, with officials from the Center for Disease Control and other specialists to determine how to protect postal employees. Unfortunately, our base of knowledge about this disease and the threat posed by anthrax was not sufficient to save the lives of two of our fellow workers. I want to reemphasize that I am

not saying that anyone was negligent, or that anyone failed to try hard to protect people. Tragically, two people died and others were injured.

I have been asked how the APWU first learned that anthrax had been discovered in a postal facility. We learned through the news media. After we learned, I met with Postmaster General Potter. At my suggestion, Mr. Potter and other top officials of the Postal Service, began meeting on a daily basis with the presidents of the postal unions and the heads of organizations representing non-union postal employees. This group has sought the best and most sophisticated medical, scientific and engineering information available to meet this threat. We have been reviewing procedures and protections constantly, seeking any available means to protect employees and the public. To their credit, Postmaster General Potter and the Postal Service have exerted every effort to assure and protect the lives of postal workers.

The employer has a legal and a moral obligation to ensure its

workers a safe and secure workplace. That obligation is most important when the issue is one of life or death. The APWU insists that postal facilities be made secure and that the mail be made safe through any necessary means.

The APWU has reached an agreement with the Postal Service that postal facilities where anthrax is found will be closed. In other facilities, even where there is no known anthrax, postal employees are to be issued protective equipment, including respirators and gloves; and environmental testing is to be pursued aggressively. No postal employee will be asked to work in a facility known to be contaminated.

This understanding about how to respond to the discovery of anthrax in a postal facility has been severely tested by the discovery of traces of anthrax in the Morgan Station facility in New York City. Based on advice from scientists, the Postal Service determined that it would close the floor in Morgan Station where the anthrax was found and continue to operate on other floors of that facility. I want to emphasize that the discovery in Morgan station was of traces of

anthrax. The Center for Disease Control has expressed the opinion that these traces are so small as not to pose a health threat to workers in other parts of the Morgan Station facility. This issue was resolved and the parties have renewed their commitment that, if contamination exists, facilities will be closed.

I also have been asked to describe the efforts by the APWU to keep its members informed during this crisis. We have an e-mail list that reaches 1700 locals of the APWU. We try to make the information available to that list as current as possible. We also have set up an 800 number that provides the same information. In addition, I have held two nationwide teleconferences. The first reached approximately 360 sites, at which multiple workers were able to participate in the call, and the second teleconference reached more than 500 sites. In the teleconferences, we provide the members an update, and respond to their questions. Each call lasted approximately two and one-half hours.

The dedication and commitment of postal workers who have

continued to work under these conditions is heroic. Notwithstanding the fact that we have assurances from the best experts on this subject, there can be no guarantee of safety under the circumstances. Postal workers in Morgan Station, and for that matter in every other postal facility in this country, are meeting the true definition of courage: despite their fear and concern, they are performing their duties. I hope and pray that the experts are right, and that no more tragic deaths are suffered.

It remains the policy of the American Postal Workers Union that buildings where anthrax is found must be closed until they are decontaminated. In our view, any amount of anthrax presumptively requires closure. We do, however, remain available to work with postal officials and officials of the Center for Disease Control in an effort to continue providing vital services to the American public.