

Accountability Day

Holding Management Accountable

By Audrey Davis

On **November 14, 1991**, letter carrier Thomas McIlvane killed five people, including himself, and injured five others at the Royal Oak post office in Michigan. The term "Going Postal" began shortly after this incident.

In order to understand why this happened, you have to understand the circumstances that led up to the horrible event.

In **1988, three years before the shooting**, Postmaster General Anthony Frank set out to eliminate more than 80,000 jobs from the Postal Service with no layoffs. They had already eliminated 37,000 jobs and planned to get rid of an additional 47,000. That was about the time letter carriers in the Royal Oak District began to

feel the increased pressure from management. To postal workers in our area that time became known as the reign of terror. Management's plan was to increase productivity and to reduce the workforce by "attrition."

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines attrition as 1) the act of wearing or grinding down by friction. 2) the act of weakening or exhausting by constant harassment, abuse, or attack. 3) a reduction in numbers usually as a result of resignation, retirement, or death.

Grinding down, exhausting by means of harassment, abuse and attack was exactly what was happening in earnest in the USPS Royal Oak District. Management



viciously targeted, hounded, harassed and set up carriers on a daily basis. They pulled every dirty trick in the book to issue discipline and get postal workers to leave the service. They were merciless. The grievance procedure was dragged out to ensure the discipline would continue to mount which left us with little recourse when we were hit with unfounded charges. It was a frightening and demoralizing time.

Tom McIlvane was one of the letter carriers that was targeted. He was a hard working carrier that had never been in any trouble. Tom was on time every day and he exceeded management's efficiency expectations; he was what we would call a "runner." He became a target because he would not submit and kowtow to management's threats.

In early 1989, in the dead of winter with 6-8 inches of snow on the ground, we were given a stand up saying "street times will never vary." They said, no matter how much mail we have or even if there's a snow storm street times will be the same every day. It was absurd but it was just one of so many ridiculous orders.

To show he wasn't intimidated by their ludicrous orders, Tom jumped up and grabbed the bar running along the tops of our letter cases. He started doing chin-ups while the managers stood there staring at him. Those kinds of actions gave strength to the rest of us at a time when it was easy to be intimidated and made to feel that you had committed some sort of crime just by showing up to work.

McIlvane was never intimidated by the bogus orders he was given and supervisors were physically afraid of him because he'd been in the Marine Corp and a professional kickboxer. He took great pride in his work as a letter carrier and saw the supervisors as bullies.

Management had their sights set on making an example of Tom McIlvane. They followed him, talked to his customers, gave him contradictory instructions. They disciplined him for minor infractions like gassing up his vehicle too often, riding his hamper down the ramp and wearing shorts that were too tight. And they disciplined him for things they made up.

In early 1990, by all accounts the climate on the workroom floor was antagonistic and very stressful. We had no support from National and the grievance procedure had ground to a snail's pace. We had a strong local union but without moving the grievances along the problems mounted. A group of us planned an informational picket line to expose our working conditions to the public. We chose April 15th, tax day because there were always lots of people at the post office on that day and usually some media would show up to film the long lines of people turning in their tax forms. Not long after we planned the protest a new management team was sent in to take over.

March 1990, Tom McIlvane had his vehicle loaded up and was about to leave for his route when a supervisor approached him and told him to take his vehicle to maintenance and have them fix the broken taillight. He was frustrated because there didn't seem to be anything wrong

with the taillights but they would have used his refusal as a reason for discipline. So he went to maintenance and was waiting for the work to be finished when a different couple of supervisors showed up and ordered him to leave and insisted nothing was wrong with the taillights. When Tom drove away to his route the supervisors followed. They followed so close that when Tom needed to stop they hit his postal vehicle from behind. They claimed that he threw his vehicle into reverse and rammed them. Tom was put out on emergency placement pending firing.

More than a year and a half before the shooting a new postmaster, Dan Prescilla was appointed to run the Royal Oak MSC. Priscilla and his team of managers came in and presented themselves as if they were there to make things better. The new station Manager, Christopher Carlisle resolved the backlog of grievances, giving the union most of what they asked for and then they asked the steward to call off the planned protest because they assured him they just wanted to work together to solve the problems.

Tom McIlvane had just bought a home and a car and stood to lose them both if he was out of work for much longer. He agreed to what is known as a “last chance” agreement and was brought back to work.

We did call off the protest but it didn’t take long to realize that the new management team was not there to make things better for letter carriers, they were there to double down on the intimidation and harassment.

Management showed the carriers a film and manufactured a rule that 3996’s had to be turned in by a specific time. (A 3996 is the carrier’s request for overtime if they think they can’t get done in eight hours). On **July 18, 1990** McIlvane turned in his 3996 late and was put out on emergency placement. While investigating the situation the steward found that there were at least seven other carriers that had also turned the form in late.

On **August 1, 1990** McIlvane had been out of work for two weeks before management agreed to bring him back. Normally management relied on the steward to contact Tom but the supervisor decided to call Tom herself to tell him to return to work. She got a busy signal and instead of calling back later or allowing the steward to contact him as they had in the past, the supervisor used the operator to “break in” on the telephone conversation. The operator at that time could break into the current conversation if the caller stated that it was an emergency. As it happened they interrupted Tom’s roommate talking to a potential employer and the roommate was quite upset about it. Tom was angry and told the supervisor so. During the conversation the supervisor failed to tell Tom to report to work the next day.

It was then alleged that Tom had used profanity with the supervisor and alleged that Tom then called two other managers and used profanity with them. The second manager was Chris Carlisle. There were no witnesses to any of these phone conversations and although no investigation was done Tom McIlvane was **again** put on emergency placement awaiting charges for removal. He was charged with conduct

unbecoming a postal employee. Management pressed criminal charges but when the case went to court the charges were thrown out for lack of evidence. Even with no evidence management still went forward with the firing.

On **August 3, 1990**, Tom McIlvane wrote, "This abusive conduct by the United States Postal Service cannot and should not be tolerated and corrective measures should be taken." Signed, Truthfully speaking, Tom McIlvane.

It was after this that the attacks on carriers at Royal Oak went into high gear. They forced us to pivot out of sheer intimidation which led to bogus route inspections and the elimination of 17 routes.

Two supervisors would follow a carrier to their route so that they had a witness and you did not. One of management's favorite tricks was to unlock the door of your vehicle while you were delivering mail so they could "catch" you with your vehicle door unlocked and write you up for failure to secure the mail.

The Priscilla/Carlisle team would have fired their own mothers to stay on the "winning team." They targeted, hounded, harassed and set up carriers on a daily basis. They cut window service, removed neighborhood collection boxes and eliminated the senior mobile unit that went out to senior citizen homes to sell stamps and collect mail.

The building we worked in housed all of Royal Oak's big shots from the Postmaster to Labor Relations to Injury Compensation. Management was so fearful of

repercussions from their mistreatment of employees that they erected a brick wall around the loading dock which included a door with a code to get in. The Postmaster replaced the wooden door to his office with a steel door.

At some point we became aware that the new postmaster and his team had come from Indianapolis where employee complaints had prompted a congressional investigation. Postal workers there had complained of harassment through unwarranted discipline and verbal or physical abuse by supervisors.

The United States General Accounting Office (GAO) blew off the complaints saying that, "organizational and personnel changes can generate considerable employee apprehension and frustration in any organization." Instead of stopping those managers from abusing postal workers, they just sent them to another state to do the same and worse.

NALC Branch 3126 was a very militant local and stood strong against management at every turn. Our branch had won almost \$200,000 in Article 8 (overtime) violations which was unusual at that time.

In **November of 1990** management set out to break up our local union by doing a zip code realignment. By changing zip codes they were able to send the president and three other elected officers from Branch 3126 to another zip code which ultimately placed them in a different union local where they were not elected officers. The zip code hoax disrupted the mail service for some 20,000 Birmingham residents. Complaints from customers

sparked a congressional investigation.

Months before the shooting, the Office of Senator Carl Levin investigated the situation at Royal Oak. The results were summarized in a staff memorandum released just **two months** before the shooting.

They documented patterns of harassment, intimidation, cruelty and allegations of favoritism in promotions and pointed to a wide-range of delivery and service problems. Sadly, the investigation was only done to find out if mail was being delayed, no one really cared that letter carriers were being abused.

We had a strong and diligent shop steward, Charlie Withers who did all he could to fight for the rights of letter carriers. But he was up against a management that did not care what penalties the post office paid or how many grievances they lost because there was never any consequences for them personally for their wrong doing.

On **November 14, 1991** the mail was getting heavy and one of our carriers was sent home on emergency placement for whistling, "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas" Another carrier was sent home for talking too loud. Tom McIlvane had been informed the night before that he'd lost at arbitration.

McIlvane walked in through the open dock doors carrying a

sawed-off semi automatic .22-caliber Ruger carbine. One of my friends, J.J. encountered McIlvane as he entered through the dock door. He saw the gun and started to raise his hands. McIlvane waved him off.

Tom went directly to Station Manager Chris Carlisle's office and shot him in the



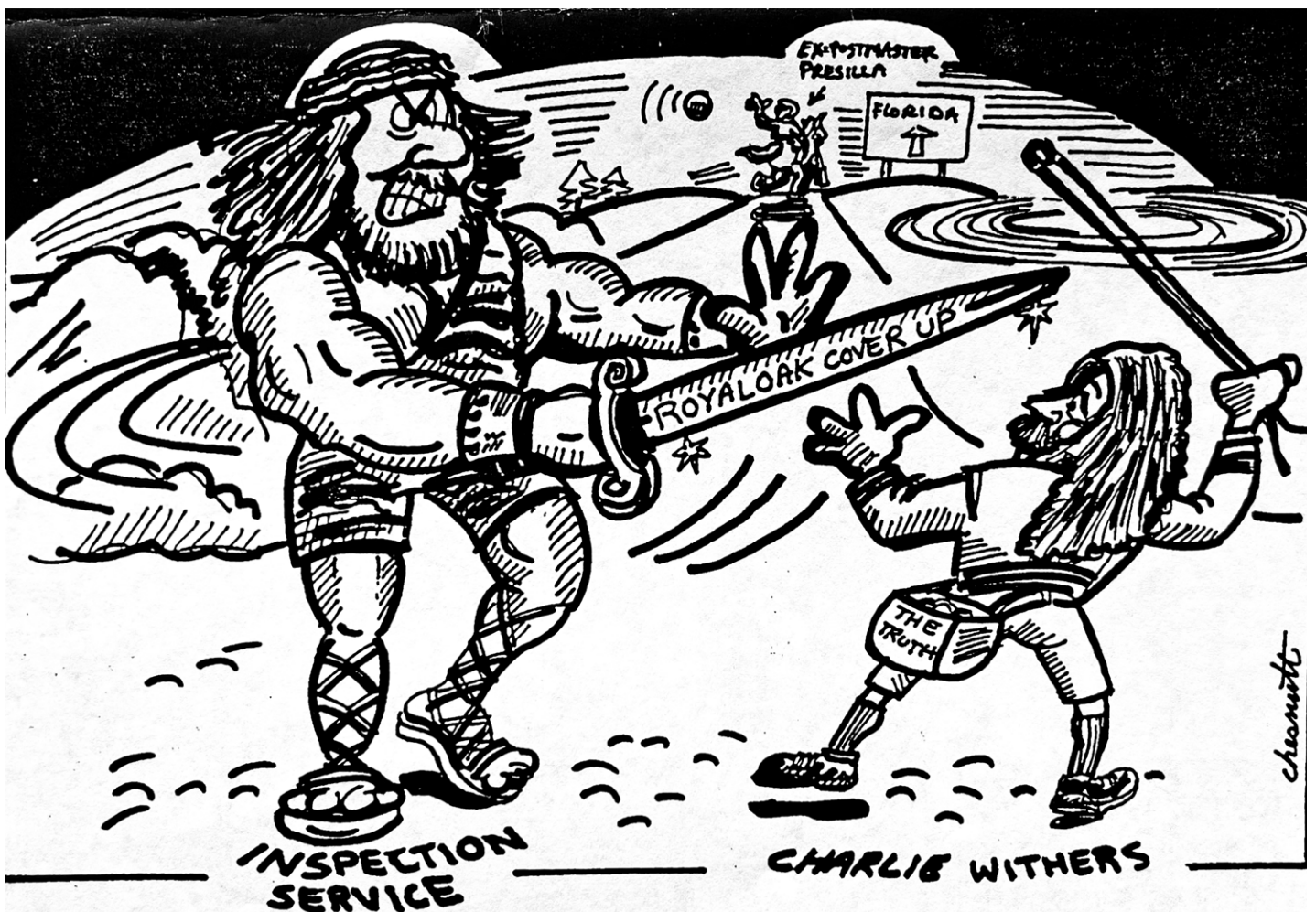
head. McIlvane turned to the supervisors nearby and shot Rose Proos and Sue Johnson. Rose was killed instantly and Sue was seriously injured.

Another supervisor, Bill Moskall ran from the unit. McIlvane gave chase but was confronted by his best friend Rocky who implored him to stop. McIlvane let off a round or two over Rocky's head to back him off.

My friend and alternate shop steward, Clark French saw supervisor Bill running for his life at full speed cutting through our unit to head for the front door. Clark, afraid for his own safety, followed the supervisor and unintentionally got in the line of fire. He took the bullet meant for the supervisor, who made it safely out the front door.

McIlvane continued down the hall and entered management offices. He encountered the postmaster's secretary who when the shooting started had begged the postmaster to let her into his office, the office with the steel door, but he had refused to open the door for her. She was cowering under her desk when McIlvane entered. It was said that he looked under the desk at her and said, "not you" and moved on.

Our shop steward Charlie Withers was meeting on grievances with someone from Labor Relations when they heard the gunfire. They both knew it was McIlvane. They closed and locked the door, turned off the light and propped a chair under the door handle.



They both sat still and quiet. They could hear screaming and gunfire. Someone ran up to the door and tried to open it, they could see the doorknob moving, then a clip from a rifle fell to the floor and they could hear another one being clicked in it's place. There were sounds of movement away from the door and then several more shots were fired in the next office.

McIlvane continued through the building killing an injury comp specialist Mary Benincasa and a labor relations assistant Keith Ciszewski. He shot and injured two more supervisors before turning the gun on himself.

The alternate steward Clark French underwent numerous surgeries to repair damage to his liver, colon and gallbladder. Clark survived the horrendous ordeal but never returned to the job.

Afterwards, the postmaster was given a huge sum of money as severance pay and he retired. All of the surviving supervisors were given bonuses and promotions.

There were news reports, investigations and congressional hearings looking into the circumstances that led to the shooting.

Congress investigated the shootings, including more than 100 interviews, and released its report in June 1992. The chairman of the House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, described the Royal Oak Post Office as a "powder keg"

and pointed out that "autocratic, para-military management techniques used there helped create an environment that drove a man to kill". Sander Levin, a Congressman from Michigan, opined: "There were numerous red flags ... but all warnings were ignored. In essence, the Postal Service was asleep at the switch."

Shop steward Charlie Withers fought very hard and for many years after to see that justice was done and those responsible were held accountable. Sadly no one in management was ever held accountable and no real justice was ever done.

However, I believe it was due to Charley's dogged pursuit of the facts that we have the Joint Statement on Violence and Behavior in the Workplace. It may not seem like much but if you read that statement and you fight for it, that document is a

"...We openly acknowledge that in some places or units there is an unacceptable level of stress in the workplace... "Making the numbers" is not an excuse for the abuse of anyone...."

Joint Statement on Violence and Behavior in the Workplace (M-1242)

powerful tool in the arsenal of weapons letter carriers have to defend themselves and to hold management accountable. Management gave in to Charley's pressure to create Accountability Day but instead of November 14th, the date of the shooting, management and the National union agreed on February 14th, knowing no one will be interested in fighting for accountability on Valentine's Day, it was just a little more salt in the wounds and an

attempt to not be held accountable. The truth is, McIlvane's lone gunman approach did nothing to change the atmosphere at the post office. The same conditions and worse still exist all over the country. What we need is true accountability. We need a strong union willing to organize on the workroom floor, to bring a united workforce to bear against these abusive conditions. We only have each other and we know there's strength in numbers. Tune in to the next issue for a discussion of our current situation and holding management accountable.

For more information:

Book on Amazon: **The Tainted Eagle by Charlie Withers** (A very in depth look at the circumstances that led to the shooting. The book includes copies of many documents)

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