‘Let them move the mail with transistors instead of brains’:
Labour convergence in posts and telecommunications, 1972-3

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ABSTRACT
The United States employs more postal workers than any other country, including China. The American Postal Workers Union and the National Association of Letter Carriers represent the majority of these workers. Since the APWU’s formation in 1970, both unions have declined to merge with one another or any other union; however, in the early 1970s, the APWU and the NALC participated in merger talks with the Communications Workers of America. This article explores the proposed merger between the APWU, the NALC, and the CWA to try to clarify why these unions continually declined to effect ‘labour convergence’.

Introduction
In the United States, the late 1960s and early 1970s were marked by wrenching conflict and structural change. What role was claimed by labour within this process of historical transformation, the result of which has been a digital capitalism shaped and dominated mostly by corporations and executive branch agencies? This is a profound and still much neglected question, and this article explores only one of its aspects. Yet, we believe, our subject commands importance; for, although their efforts have scarcely been touched by scholarship (although passing reference is made by Walsh and Mangum in their 1992 monograph on postal unions), trade unions in wire line telecommunications and in the Post Office constituted active agencies of change at a relatively early and contingent phase of this evolution. Deteriorating labour-management relations, culminating in two major strikes, contributed to new trade union initiatives aimed at what Mosco and McKercher (2008) call ‘labour convergence’. In order to establish themselves as a more powerful collective social actor, unions attempted both to reconstruct postal unions on an industry-wide basis and to meld the wire line and postal workforces into a single integrated telecommunications union.
Though these initiatives failed, it is arguable that this result itself helped to set the terms on which key aspects of the unfolding historical process then proceeded.

As a result of this failure, within the United States – the historical source and centre of a transnational trend to a neoliberal digital capitalism (Schiller, 1999) – policy and practice were enabled to proceed much more fully along the lines that capital, as opposed to labour, preferred. Had labour convergence in posts and telecommunications succeeded, of course, we cannot say what the results would have been. But we may at least suggest that our present version of digital capitalism might be different.

In order to comprehend how distinct groups of organised workers jostled and collaborated, between 1970 and 1973, in attempts to actualise labour convergence across a strikingly ambitious range, it is helpful to begin by according brief attention to the institutional metamorphosis that was called at that time ‘postal reorganisation’.

**Postal reorganisation**

In 1970 the Post Office Department became the United States Postal Service, via the largest restructuring of a government agency in US history. Signed into law by President Richard Nixon, the Postal Reorganization Act transformed this nationwide system from a cabinet-level agency to a publicly-owned corporation. The process took several years to accomplish, as it was hotly contested amongst rank and file workers, postal management, corporate bulk mailers, and the executive and legislative branches of government. Proponents hoped to cater to the needs of bulk mailers by introducing new levels of automation and associated changes in the postal labour process. These objectives were concealed behind the drapery of the much-publicised goals of efficiency and self-sufficiency, although throughout its 180 years of operation the post office had operated at a loss, with rare exceptions, and had relied on Congressional subsidies in order to perform its essential but complex roles - both for capital and for democracy (Walsh & Mangum, 1992).

On the eve of this change, postal workers numbered nearly 700,000, and this massive workforce regarded reorganisation with scepticism and suspicion because of its potential impacts on postal operations and labour relations (Causey, 1972; Tierney, 1981). Represented by several craft unions, postal employees had hitherto bargained directly with Congress. Rank and file workers were concerned that the proposed reorganisation would pull the rug out from under this long-established practice, which their unions had learned how to influence, and therefore they held out against giving it support. At the same time, wages had not kept pace with inflation and financially-pinched postal workers were becoming increasingly frustrated. After President Nixon refused to support a wage increase until the unions agreed in turn to support reorganisation, postal workers staged a walk-out. A wildcat strike began in March 1970, at the Manhattan-Bronx Postal Union, and spread from there over the course of a week. Approximately 200,000 workers participated, with the walkout cascading from New York to Cleveland, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, and San Francisco; all regions save the South were affected. The postal strike of 1970 was the first major strike ever against the United States Government, and President Nixon reacted forcefully. Tens of thousands of Army and National Guard members were called out to assist
in mail processing operations in New York City – both the source of the strike and the epicentre of postal operations. Postal employees ultimately won substantial wage increases, a no-lay-offs clause, and a guarantee of binding third party arbitration. But they lost on the over-arching issue of reorganisation (Shannon, 1978; Tierney, 1981).

Without at least grudging acquiescence by unionised postal employees, the Postal Reorganization Act could not have passed. While postal workers’ opposition had constituted a formidable barrier, the horse-trading that followed the strike settled workers’ contracts on favourable terms – but at the price of proceeding with postal reorganisation. That outcome in turn led union leaders to identify labour convergence as a newly urgent strategic objective.

American Postal Workers Union

In response to reorganisation and related changes to the bargaining process, some labour leaders began advocating for a single union to represent postal workers. The goal of establishing an industrial union to represent the entire non-managerial postal workforce had surfaced repeatedly between the 1930s and the 1950s, but the balkanised structure of postal unions had remained an insuperable obstacle. Postal unions had first formed when clerks, carriers, and handlers worked in isolation from one another. Merger attempts commenced with the founding of the Congress of Industrial Organisations in 1935; however, disparate histories and differing political priorities worked against them. As recently as 1958, the departure of the more radical members of the National Federation of Postal Clerks had split that union, creating two separate organisations. The rump group became the United Federation of Postal Clerks (UFPC) and the radicals formed the National Postal Union (NPU) (Walsh & Mangum, 1992).

The strike and the postal reorganisation that followed it re-ignited efforts to forge an encompassing industrial union. During the strike, many rank-and-file members of the several postal unions had refused to cross the Letter Carriers’ picket lines – this may well have generated a heightened sense of shared purpose and destiny. Meanwhile, the new mandate, to bargain not with Congress but with USPS management, engendered a felt need to bulk up (Walsh & Mangum, 1992). Perhaps the chief bearer of this impulse was the American Postal Workers Union (APWU), which was formed through a complex series of mergers immediately following postal reorganisation, between late 1970 and 1971. Members of the National Association of Post Office and General Service Maintenance Employees (NAPOGSME), the National Association of Special Delivery Messengers (NASDM), and the National Federation of Post Office Motor Vehicle Employees (NFPMOVE), the United Federation of Postal Clerks (UFPC), and the National Postal Union (NPU) voted overwhelmingly for the merger that would produce the American Postal Workers Union in May 1971 (United Federation of Postal Clerks, 1971a). APWU President, Francis Filbey, explicitly favoured an industrial union structure, emphasising that ‘in One Big Union we can meet One Big Management on something near an equal footing,’ (United Federation of Postal Clerks, 1971c:5). Buoyed by the swiftness with which the several postal unions now seemed to be consolidating, Filbey expressed his hope ‘to make One Big Union a reality in 1971,’ (United Federation of Postal Clerks, 1971b:3). The new American Postal Workers
Union represented more than 320,000 workers. The leaders of the five merging unions indeed explicitly expressed the hope that the remaining postal unions, including the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC), will be inspired to join the merger ranks, (United Federation of Postal Clerks, 1971d:10). In addition to the NALC, the remaining postal unions included the National Rural Letter Carriers’ Association, the National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees, and the National Postal Mail Handlers Union.

The NALC’s reluctance to merge with the APWU would prove a serious obstacle to establishing an industrial union to represent all postal workers. NALC leaders stood resolute in insisting that their union should not be absorbed into such a structure – and actively explored alternatives. In August 1971, after the formation of APWU had been completed, new merger talks were held with the NALC, the unions already having met twice before. APWU General Executive Vice President David Silvergleid reported that ‘recent meetings between the APWU and NALC merger committees have indicated mutual realization of the need for one postal union,’ (1971:13). In November 1971, however, the NALC Executive Council released a list of conditions for merger, which included a stipulation that the APWU would serve as a ‘federation of Postal Service labour organisations’ and that ‘each division shall operate under its own Constitution and By-Laws,’ (Silvergleid, 1972:23). Evidently disheartened, David Silvergleid responded to NALC’s stipulation by conceding that ‘we are resigned to the fact that merger cannot take place under the conditions outlined above prior to the next national convention of NALC ... we regret that the inevitable and essential One Postal Union will be delayed’ (1972:23).

Delayed, but not curtailed; for merger talks in fact continued into 1972. In May of that year NALC President James Rademacher was quoted as saying that he remained optimistic about merger prospects and that it was what ‘everybody wants’, (American Postal Workers Union, 1972a:37). As they continued to discuss details with the NALC, at this juncture APWU leaders also began to explore a disparate merger proposal floated by the Communications Workers of America.

We will explore the CWA’s motive for such a combination later; for now it is more important to emphasise that its overture found substantial support on the postal side. APWU leader Francis Filbey attended the CWA Annual Convention in June 1972, two months before the first APWU convention. APWU members were informed that ‘such a merger in response to the imperatives of swiftly-changing technology in the whole field of communications would create one of the biggest and most powerful unions on earth’, (American Postal Workers Union, 1972b:6). At the same time that Filbey agreed to bring a merger proposal to the APWU membership, he and CWA President Beirne asked the NALC to join their merger talks. Before the summer’s end, the CWA, the APWU, and the NALC were in the thick of these deliberations.

With a combined membership of more than one million workers, a merger between the three unions would have formed the largest single union in the American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO. The Confederation had actively pushed for mergers since 1955, when its own formation had flowed from a merger between the two erstwhile rival federations. And AFL-CIO President George Meany gave a vocal blessing to the proposed combination of
the CWA, APWU, and NALC. At a gala dinner in honour of Francis Filbey held in November 1972, Meany declared:

*I hope they succeed because, the way things have developed in America in the last ten or fifteen years, we need not a lot of small unions, we need stronger unions, where the combined assets, and the combined talents, and the combined energies can be put to work for all in an industry or a calling that is related.* (Filbey, 1973:6)

There is little question that, in theory at least, a merged CWA, APWU, and NALC would have constituted a strong working-class organisation, capable of wielding political as well as industrial pressure. Of course, we will never know whether or how it might it have exercised this power in relation to the concurrent process of telecommunications liberalisation and technological change.

The ‘swiftly-changing technology’ to which Filbey referred constituted a critical issue. Multifarious innovations were either already palpable or clearly on the horizon. These included: widespread computerised automation of communications work processes; product substitution, as voice telephony competed more comprehensively with letters and postcards, while an emerging application that would eventually be called email began its explosive rise (Abbate, 1999); and, as Michael Palm (2010) points out, a proliferating trend to network-based self-service. How would these cascading changes affect work and workers? Through the 1930s and early 1940s, the introduction of new technology – ‘mechanisation,’ as it then was called – had comprised a key bargaining priority among CIO unions (Bix, 2000); as late as 1954, as the idea of automation took hold, CIO President Walter Reuther had stated that unions should have ‘supervision of the way in which mechanical brains and muscles are introduced, and above all, some method to keep men at work’ (Kaempffert, 1954:E9). Yet, while some unionists identified a need to develop a direct say in how technology would be implemented, by the 1950s many unions had relinquished the CIO’s earlier militancy with regard to technological change and labour process reorganisation. This did not, however, prevent postal and communications workers’ unions from identifying a need to erect strong defences to ensure that automation would not displace workers throughout the entire sector. Postal reorganisation intensified these concerns. In an extended discussion of technological change, President Filbey referred to established arrangements:

*being zipped and zapped by surges of electronic circuitry which the Postal Service no doubt hopes will one day replace the human brain …*

*The optical scanners, the letter sorters, the BMTs, the facer-cancellers are truly wondrous machines, but they’re also heavily infested with bugs, and they still need skilled hands and minds to run and repair them …*

*For their part, the new managers – as new managers like to do – have suggested that our proud and historic traditions of mental and physical dexterity are no longer vital to the operation of modern postal functions. To them, our cherished skills are mere memory items or ‘systems of rote’. If that is so, let them move the mail with transistors instead of brains. The commodity most urgently needed by the postal service is skill and that’s what Management*
must pay for regardless of how it's packaged or what they choose to call it in the bright new pushbutton world. (Filbey, 1971:14-17)

The APWU merger resolution with the CWA and the NALC was passed at the former union's founding convention in August 1972. However the resolution was not unanimously endorsed. Some members, notably the president of the APWU’s Brooklyn local, Ben Zemsky, who had unsuccessfully challenged Filbey for the union presidency, believed that 'all postal unions should first be merged into one before approaches to other unions are made', (American Postal Workers Union, 1972c:6). Filbey and the APWU leadership, keen to pursue the new merger talks, dismissed Zemsky’s concern. Merger talks were authorised through a voice vote on the convention floor, 'despite a loud minority chorus of nays' (American Postal Workers Union, 1972c:6).

In January 1973, all three unions went as far as to agree on a provisional draft of a constitution, as well as a proposed name – the American Communications Union. The merger committees and subcommittees of each union subsequently met to review the draft and to make any necessary changes. As of February, the Executive Board of the APWU planned to review the document at the annual meeting held in March. Filbey told members that ‘it is hoped that after all the suggested changes have been given the fullest of consideration, as well as other technical matters involving the drafting of the actual merger agreement, a proposal will be ready for submission through referendum procedures to the membership’ (Filbey, 1973:9).

The proposed draft for the three unions became irrelevant in March 1973 when NALC pulled out of the merger talks. The APWU stated that it was still interested in pursuing a merger with CWA. Continued negotiations were further hampered by a new round of bargaining talks for the APWU, set to begin in April. Filbey stressed that merger discussions would only be suspended temporarily, and would recommence as soon as the APWU finished bargaining (American Postal Workers Union, 1973b:20). In September 1973, however, Filbey still seemed disappointed by the departure of the NALC from the merger talks, noting dourly that ‘there isn't any hope of merger with the NALC at this time ... we're ready at any time to sit down and discuss merger with the NALC. They have indicated that they are not’ (American Postal Workers Union, 1973c:18).

APWU was almost certainly motivated to pursue merger talks with the CWA in the hopes that the NALC would likewise be enticed to cooperate in consolidation. Francis Filbey had designs on a merger with the NALC when he was president of the United Federation of Postal Clerks, and he continued to court the NALC once he assumed the presidency of the APWU. Once the NALC withdrew from merger talks, however, the APWU itself also became less inclined to proceed. Perhaps the concerns of APWU member Ben Zemsky, dismissed at the 1972 convention, were deep-seated. Only analysis of the unions’ merger files and other primary documents may permit us to ascertain why the APWU pursued and dropped merger talks with the CWA. What, we still need to ask, were CWA’s motives for this ambitious initiative?

Communications Workers of America

Today the Communications Workers of America (CWA) represents more than half a million workers employed in a widening range of telecommunications and media
fields, and describes itself as ‘The Union for the Information Age’ (Communications Workers of America, 2009). Its route to this destination began, in practical terms, with an attempt to make common cause with postal workers. Founded in 1947 out of the National Federation of Telephone Workers, a collection of erstwhile AT&T company unions, CWA offered these now independent organisations a common home, and it affiliated with the CIO two years later. Joseph Beirne had served as CWA President since its inception (Brooks, 1977). During the final years of his presidency, Beirne pushed forcefully for a merger with the postal workers, within the context of CWA’s ‘Growth’ initiative.

Delegates first adopted ‘Resolution Number One on CWA Growth’ in 1965 at the 27th Annual Convention of the CWA. Initially the resolution was described as ‘Operation Triple Threat,’ in part because the union leadership hoped to triple its membership of 400,000 by 1975. It is also important to note that, in 1965, the process of telecommunications restructuring that would occur around and through the Federal Communications Commission and the Executive Branch was only getting started (Schiller, 1982). A militant and powerful union of telecommunications workers, were it to focus its strategic energies in this direction, might have been able to influence the character of what turned out to be a transformative regulatory process. Market liberalisation might not have been averted, even so; but it might well have been moderated and, perhaps more important, it might have become an issue of widespread political debate as a more truly democratic procedure would have entailed.

Beirne and the CWA turned to private contractors for advice on how to cope with deep-seated changes occurring in telecommunications. The Diebold Group was commissioned in 1964 to conduct a study on the impact of automation on communications work, and the resulting report was released in early 1965 (Communications Workers of America, 1965). In 1969, CWA leaders hired the Arthur D. Little consulting firm to study the union and make strategic recommendations about its future. The union’s selection of both Diebold and ADL amounted to a striking choice about where expertise was to be found. John Diebold has been credited with coining the term ‘automation’ (Brooks, 1977); another blue-chip management consultancy, ADL, operated comfortably at the upper reaches of the Executive Branch (Guttmann & Willner, 1976). ADL had only just completed work as a major contractor for the postal reorganisation initiative; and it was concurrently helping to craft what would prove to be an encompassing discourse about telecommunications liberalisation. ADL’s selection may attest to a paucity of truly independent expertise, or a naïve belief in the neutrality of consultants, or a search for legitimacy by a business-oriented union leadership. In any case, the resulting report and recommendations were discussed at a special convention in March 1971, which was convened expressly for this purpose. Arthur D. Little advised that the CWA not only needed to increase the size of its membership but also to diversify the types of workplaces it represented. Additional research is again needed here, but it is difficult to conceive of ADL suggesting that that the preferred means to these goals should be aggressive organising campaigns to reach un-unionised workers or militant initiatives to set the terms on which technological change would occur.
In January 1972, when membership had increased to around 550,000, President Joseph Beirne reaffirmed the CWAs plan to grow to 1.25 million members by 1975. Beirne declared that ‘in this age of conglomerates, when industry continues to grow at staggering rates, CWA must grow at the same pace,’ (Beirne, 1972b:3). Growth was the topic of more than twenty separate articles published in CWA News between 1972 and 1973, and it was taken so seriously that the word was capitalised each time it was mentioned, as though it were a proper noun. Growth had been a stated goal since 1965; however, in concrete terms, the content of the new strategy seems to have remained ambiguous: how was it to be actualised? What organising strategies and merger initiatives might be pursued most fruitfully?

Akin to the process that led to the formation of the APWU, only a major job action moved the Growth goal to the forefront of CWA strategy. The round of bargaining in 1971 had been particularly contentious, with 400,000 CWA workers striking nationally for one week, and 37,000 New York Telephone workers striking for seven months. This was the second national strike in four years – and only the third in the previous 24 years.

The CWA had been engaged in a long struggle to achieve national collective bargaining status with the sprawling Bell system monopoly. The union continued to negotiate new contracts each year with each of the 21 Bell affiliates – a process that lent itself to energy-consuming negotiations amid recurrent threats to union cohesion. Joseph Beirne and others insisted that their union should only have to negotiate with one national employer – AT&T – because AT&T management constituted the actual policymaker and bargaining force for the Bell System. Enlarging the union's membership was seen, first and foremost, as a means through which to pressure AT&T to agree to national collective bargaining.

The recent nationwide strikes rendered this strategy urgent, as Beirne and other CWA members saw it: ‘If CWA is to continue to be successful at the bargaining table, it must enjoy the Growth necessary to equip it for battle against highly organised, giant conglomerates with diversified holdings which make them highly defensible in dispute situations’ (Beirne, 1972b:3). Growth correlated directly with collective bargaining power. Union recruitment drives – 400 electronics workers in Oregon, 300 independent telephone company workers in Iowa, another 2500 in Alabama, a group of cable television employees in Texas and another in New York – were regularly reported in CWA News during 1972 and 1973 (Communications Workers of America, 1972d; 1972e; 1972f; 1973b; 1973c).

The variety of industries within which these new members worked might seem to demonstrate that the CWA had already embarked on a well-defined growth strategy, intended to make it into something more than a telephone union. In actuality, at least into mid-1972, Beirne seems to have vacillated – at least, for public consumption – over the concrete content of what remained the union's top priority (Beirne, 1972a:12). Thus, at the CWAs 34th Annual Convention in May, Beirne conceded that one means of realising the union's Growth goals would be to organise non-unionised workers. However, he clearly preferred a second option – to merge with existing unions. Convention delegates were urged to approve 'Resolution Number One', which would authorise the CWA leadership to pursue merger talks with the newly-formed American Postal Workers Union.
Beirne reported the next year that between 1965 and 1973, the CWA had ‘gained 158,592 members,’ (Beirne, 1973a:3); yet this achievement gave the CWA only two years to gain more than 600,000 members in order to meet the union’s established goal. In seven years the CWA had gained fewer than 200,000 members; now it would have to more than double its membership within just a two-year period.

Merger with APWU and NALC would satisfy this objective. But what motivated Beirne to target these specific organisations? Might it have been because, as sitting president of the global union federation Postal, Telegraph, and Telephone International (PTTI), he was familiar with the government ministries of Posts, Telephone and Telegraphs, and their multimodal workforces, common throughout most of the world, including Western Europe and Japan? Might it have been, as well, because as PTTI president Beirne was familiar with the British postal strike of 1971, to which PTTI had lent its support and whose efficacy had been limited owing to newly widespread access to the voice telecommunications network?

Delegates approved Resolution Number One, described as ‘perhaps the most important action taken at the 34th Annual CWA Convention’, (Communications Workers of America, 1972b:6). This resolution authorised the formation of a merger committee and empowered that committee to proceed with merger talks. In addition to echoing Beirne’s justification for the CWA’s Growth policy, the resolution stated that it was also in the postal workers’ best interest to increase their numbers. The postal workers and the communications workers were united by the consolidation of corporate power in the information industry:

*The recent move to de-federalise the American postal system, and the trend toward industrial conglomerates both warn us that we must be prepared and able to display and utilize our strength to its maximum effectiveness. We know that those whom we confront at the bargaining tables have already developed their corporate strength to the maximum degree.* (Communications Workers of America, 1972a:6)

Beirne was not alone in his advocacy of merger. There, to promote the passage of the merger resolution, was APWU President Francis Filbey, who told the delegates that:

*The day must come when all workers, in all aspects of the communications industry, must be unified for the protection of all. No longer can postal employees say they have nothing in common with their fellow citizens in other communications fields ... we must get together to protect one another.* (Communications Workers of America, 1972a:6)

Evidently supportive of the Growth agenda, Filbey called Joseph Beirne a ‘visionary’ for his outlook on the future of communications and its implications for organised labour. In August, 1972, at the American Postal Workers Union’s convention, a complementary resolution was adopted.

Following the CWA Annual Convention, Beirne reached out to the National Association of Letter Carriers, the next largest postal workers union after the APWU. In a letter to NALC President James Rademacher, Beirne wrote, ‘the essence of the resolution we are looking at is the acceptance of the idea that there should be one great union in the entire postal and communications field’ (Communications Workers
of America, 1972c:2). At their July 1972 convention, NALC delegates voted to authorise a merger committee. There were well over 600,000 members in the APWU and the NALC combined. Thus, if the unions merged with the CWA, they could easily push union membership to 1.25 million.

By the autumn of 1972, merger talks were officially underway between the CWA, APWU, and NALC. Beirne, Filbey, and Rademacher and merger committees from all three unions met in October 1972 to discuss strategy. A significant portion of the day-long meeting involved discussion of each union’s current organisational structure, and how that structure might fit into a merged postal and telecommunications union. Subcommittees were formed and their members were tasked with drafting reports on the national and local structures of each union (Communications Workers of America, 1972h:4).

In December 1972, Beirne reported in his monthly column ‘Off My Mind’ that the subcommittees’ findings indicated that ‘there is a common basis for the merger,’ (Beirne, 1972b:3). He pointed out that while, under the necessary restructuring CWA members would not face a dues increase, members from the APWU and the NALC would face ‘a substantial increase,’ (Beirne, 1972b:3). He suggested that APWU and NALC locals had less support from the national leadership.

Beirne’s December 1972 piece would be the last time the proposed merger was discussed in CWA News. He closed the column by combining optimism with a warning: We ... anticipate that all of the necessary legal work can be done during the year 1973 so that we can be prepared for the operation of a merged organisation in 1974’ wrote Beirne, before concluding that ‘if we do not find the right answers to effect a merger by 1974 we might as well forget the whole idea because it will then become entangled in the personal, political presumptions of ambitious people. (Beirne, 1972b:3)

Only additional archival research may serve to clarify what Beirne meant by this somewhat enigmatic statement. During 1973, with merger now off the table, CWA searched for continued external growth and the pursuit of national collective bargaining. Sick with cancer, Beirne resigned from the presidency in early 1974 (Brooks, 1977). Before stepping down, Beirne announced in January that CWA members, by now numbering 600,000, had achieved a long-awaited victory: AT&T had finally agreed to national collective bargaining. An American Communications Union, however, remained an unrealised dream.

National Association of Letter Carriers

Founded in 1889, the National Association of Letter Carriers is the oldest postal workers’ union in the United States. Since its formation, the NALC has declined to merge with any other union, postal or otherwise. From 1970 to 1971, though participating in the talks that preceded the merger, the NALC was the only major postal union that did not join in forming the American Postal Workers Union. In January 1971, NALC members were informed that their leaders held ‘hopes of reaching agreement on the feasibility and possibility of merger between the two crafts,’
Three months later, President James Rademacher announced that he had rejected the combination with APWU, citing concerns over costs, craft identity, and representation under the new structure.

Rademacher asserted that the NALC did indeed desire a single union for postal workers in the United States (Rademacher, 1971a), declaring that:

*We have long been of the opinion … that there must be only one spokesman for the 600,000 postal workers whose objectives are generally the same. On the other hand, as the oldest and most respected of all unions representing government workers, we do not intend to turn over our assets, our membership and our prestige to any group or groups until we are confident that in so doing, we would be acting in the total support of the welfare of our membership. (Rademacher, 1971a:5)*

He closed by saying that the NALC would have to postpone re-opened merger talks until the formation of the APWU was completed. A few months later, Rademacher explained that NALC ‘had hoped for an “inside-outside” alignment of unions’, but that the APWU seemed to be more a clerks’ union (Rademacher, 1971b:28). In the ‘inside-outside’ model, the NALC sought to establish a union structure wherein the clerks (inside workers) and the letter carriers (outside workers) would maintain separate contracts.

Talks suddenly recommenced at the NALC’s biennial convention in 1972, where its merger committee ‘recommended that we accept the invitation of the Communications Workers of America-AFL-CIO and conduct meetings with that group to study the possibility of merger’ (National Association of Letter Carriers, 1972a:66). NALC joined the other two unions involved in highlighting the salience of corporate convergence:

*The three unions involved in the merger talks are concerned about the trend toward industrial conglomerates and want to be prepared and able to display and utilise their combined strength to maximize effectiveness. (National Association of Letter Carriers, 1972b:7)*

There seems no reason to doubt the sincerity of NALC’s concerns; early in 1973 they also considered and rejected a separate merger proposal from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. At the same time, however, NALC’s merger committee reiterated its basic concern: ‘unless our demands for the establishment of an inside-outside division of one such union are met, we continue to resist associating the NALC with the American Postal Workers Union.’ (National Association of Letter Carriers, 1972a:66).

In March 1973 the NALC withdrew from the negotiations. The NALC Merger Committee rejected the proposed Constitution for the American Communications Union, this time citing concerns over increased dues, disproportional representation, and changes in voting procedures. Under the proposed structure, dues would have increased by more than 50%, there would have been one convention delegate for every 200 members, and convention votes would have taken place on the conference floor rather than through a direct mail ballot. The Merger Committee ‘proclaimed that nothing could be gained for letter carriers in such a merger’; (National Association of Letter Carriers, 1973:11). The Executive Council directed the Merger Committee to cease merger talks, and further stated that no action on merger would be taken until the next convention, scheduled for August 1974. Even with this strong rejection of
merger, the NALC Merger Committee still declared that ‘it has not divorced itself from the concept of merger,’ and that ‘it further recommended that the NALC continue to explore the feasibility of merger’ (National Association of Letter Carriers, 1973:11).

Discussion and conclusion

In the early 1970s, information workers in the postal and communications sectors attempted to meet industrial convergence head on by effecting labour convergence. Several factors impeded the merger between the Communications Workers of America, the American Postal Workers Union, and the National Association of Letter Carriers. Although there was evidence of some shared motivations in each union’s leadership, these proved insufficient to carry the unions through into a combination in the face of separate histories and somewhat disparate motives. The CWA and Joseph Beirne hoped to expand the union by hundreds of thousands, the APWU and Francis Filbey wanted a single union for postal employees, while the NALC and James Rademacher wanted to preserve the letter carriers’ craft union identity and strengthen their job security.

The APWU was a new union facing a radically transformed postal system. While the APWU wished to guarantee the viability of postal work in the information age, its members and leadership wanted to combine the postal unions together before merging with a union outside the postal sector. Try as he might, Francis Filbey was unable to rally sufficient member support for a CW A merger without NALC participation. Militant in defending its venerable craft union autonomy, the NALC remained wary of being submerged in a vast industrial union.

Additional contributing factors may have played a part, including finances, pre-existing tensions, and the relationship between gender, race, and craft identity. Rademacher and the NALC voiced concerns on all of these issues. The NALC possessed a substantial treasury by the early 1970s, and was reluctant to be absorbed into another union without retaining authority over the allocation of its members’ money. The APWU, on the other hand, was overwhelmed by the cost of running a large union, not to mention the costs of negotiating the merger of five unions. Two months after the APWU was formed, Francis Filbey bluntly admitted, ‘With the final costs of the merger referendum, the final cost of negotiations, the cost of programs we have going ... yes, we’re going to have troubles’ (American Postal Workers Union, 1971:29). CW A members, finally, already paid higher dues. Financially, therefore, the NALC’s concern that the merger would be far from reciprocal, and that the APWU (if not the CWA) would gain at the NALC’s expense, appears to have been justified.

The NALC and the APWU also had to overcome pre-existing tensions, some of which were quite recent. In December 1969, before postal reorganisation had been finalised, Rademacher announced his support for the scheme, in effect breaking what had been ‘united union opposition’ to reorganisation (Shannon, 1978:17). Unlike Filbey, Rademacher had voted for Nixon and tended to be far less critical of Nixon-era economic policies. Furthermore, although Filbey and Rademacher both stated that they desired to create a single postal union, the APWU and the NALC had been disputing their respective organising territories, with the APWU charging the NALC with raiding on more than one occasion (Cullen, 1971). This could hardly have helped smooth the negotiations.
Finally, sexist and racist attitudes may have compounded the centrifugal force tearing against convergence. Although more women and people of colour were working in the postal service in the early 1970s than ever before, postal work remained a white male-dominated sector. In January 1973, while the NALC contemplated merger offers from both the CWA/APWU and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the NALC’s Midwest coordinator, Henry Zych, cast the issue this way: ‘a merger with the Teamsters would be a more logical move and would do us more good than the communications workers representing telephone operators’ (National Association of Letter Carriers, 1973:2). Some part of the reluctance to throw their lot in with CWA seems to have reflected gendered stereotypes about CWA members and a related disparagement of women’s labour. Venus Green’s history of labour in the Bell System shows, however, that CWA’s own national leaders ‘sought to protect ... the rights of white men over the rights of others’ (2001:245).

In an extension of the union’s lacklustre record with regard to controls over automation in telecommunications, during the 1970s,

*the Bell System manipulated women and non-whites into jobs adversely affected by technological change, the union leadership made no genuine protests because these changes did not affect white male jobs.* (Green, 2001: 245)

The American Postal Workers Union and the Communications Workers of America resuscitated merger talks a handful of times after the 1972-73 period: in the late 1970s, the mid 1980s, and the late 1990s (Causey, 1979; Bahr, 1998). As of this writing, the APWU, the CWA, and the NALC remain discrete labour organisations. Postal and telecommunications unions have yet to unite in the United States; however the rationale for merger first proposed nearly forty years ago remains as relevant as ever.

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