


# THE ROLE OF UNIONS IN TIMES OF CRISIS


Lessons Learned From COVID-19





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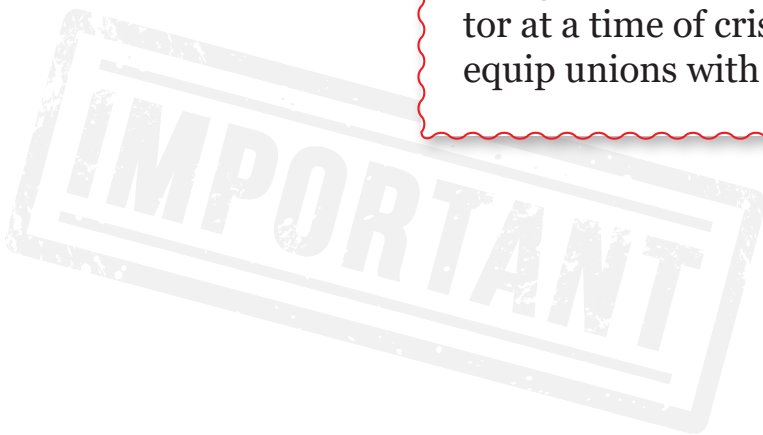
# Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has proven the value of post as a vital service during a crisis. Postal workers across the globe have stepped up to maintain deliveries and services, connecting people at a time when they are most in need. Trade unions have fought for - and won - better health and safety protections for workers to enable postal services to continue. Postal operators have taken on multiple new tasks, providing a lifeline to millions during the pandemic.

However, the coronavirus crisis has put an enormous strain on Universal Service Providers (USPs) as well as postal workers. This guide aims to help unions anticipate and mitigate threats to postal services and worker health and safety when disasters hit - whether on a local, regional or national level.

The guide highlights cases of best practice during the COVID-19 pandemic and identifies ways unions can maintain USPs' crucial role in society and secure postal workers' jobs.

The goal is to reinforce the post as an essential actor at a time of crisis - and in its aftermath - and to equip unions with the tools to come out stronger.





# Universal Service Obligation extension

## Push to increase the USO and develop new services

The Universal Service Obligation (USO) guarantees nationwide service to all citizens and ensures employment for postal workers around the world. The only acceptable reason to reduce the USO is a temporary reduction of services in the event of workers being endangered.

*The United Kingdom provides an example of COVID-19 being used as an excuse to reduce services. Without any consultation, the country's USP, Royal Mail, announced the reduction of the USO from a six to five-day delivery through to the end of the summer period. Royal Mail claimed this was in response to major operational problems, increased volumes in e-commerce products and a significant decline in letters. In fact, the announcement came after the peak of the crisis, and aroused fears that Royal Mail was taking advantage of the crisis to accelerate plans to reduce the USO permanently.*

**FAILED**

Extending the scope of the USO through diversification is key to sustaining postal activity and work for employees – and unions have a role to play.

In recent years, French USP, La Poste France, has increased its value to society and diversified into providing new services to the community. These became particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic, and some were even included in the government's list of essential services including:

- 1.** “Watch Over My Parents” a service designed to help the elderly remain autonomous, and reassure their families, by having postal employees pay social visits and enquire on their wellbeing.
- 2.** A meal delivery service for the elderly and people with diminishing autonomy, allowing them to receive healthy meals and be checked upon on a regular basis.

COVID-19 itself triggered new services from La Poste France, including:

- 1.** An IT delivery service – postal workers brought spare school computer equipment to children in need.



2. The delivery and return of homework assignments by post.
3. A home mail collection service for vulnerable people.
4. A new service for sending registered letters and parcels from the mailbox without having to go to the post office.

While good examples of diversification, they are not perfect - French unions are now pushing for La Poste France to implement better working conditions for postal workers providing these services.



Italy

In Italy, the Universal Service Provider, Poste Italiane provided financial services throughout the country during the COVID-19 pandemic. The USP and the SLP-CISL union concluded an agreement with the Italian government to ensure that all pensioners received their pension on time. Every pensioner knew the day when they could collect their pension payment to limit the numbers of pensioners in the post office at once. The agreement also guaranteed pensioners were escorted home by the police once their pension was withdrawn.

Extending the scope of the USO by adding additional services during a crisis is key to securing postal jobs. Unions must reach out to management and governments to ensure the ongoing diversification of the post and that services offered during the turmoil months of the pandemic are maintained post-crisis, while being respectful of workers' terms and conditions.



Bangladesh



Finland



# Delivery network: a cocktail approach

## Call for a one-stream delivery organization



Austria



India

Jan Simpson, President for the Canadian Union Postal Workers (CUPW-STTP) said “the best way to innovate on the last mile is a cocktail approach which mixes all delivery items including parcels, letter mail, flyers and new services like groceries and check-in services in one vehicle. This would allow postal operators to:

- 1.** Maximize revenues
- 2.** Minimize traffic and pollution
- 3.** Help us to maintain good jobs for our members in the face of competition predicated on precarious working conditions

Leveraging the cocktail to provide new services will also help ensure public support for a viable, publicly owned post office.”

This cocktail approach is key to securing postal workers’ jobs in a very competitive market and making sure the USP adds its own contribution to making the post and logistics industry sustainable.

In Germany, USP Deutsche Post has implemented a one-stream organization in rural areas. Letters and parcels are channelled through the same network, which not only cuts costs and secures market share, but also sustains jobs for postmen and postwomen.



## The vital utility of the postal network during a crisis

### Fight for a nationwide postal network and direct employment

Postal workers in Mozambique played a key role in recovery operations when the country was hit by a severe tropical cyclone in March 2019. More than 700 people were killed and hundreds of thousands more were severely impacted by the natural disaster.

Cyclone Idai cut Mozambique in two and postal employees acted as the vital link between the divided North and South. The post transported public-donated supplies to deprived communities that were most affected by the storm, as well as providing vital storage capacity for goods.

The postal service in Mozambique prevailed during the disaster because it could rely on experienced staff and a comprehensive nationwide network to deliver life sustaining support to citizens in need.

The universal service provider must be staffed by well-trained employees on permanent and full-time contracts or it risks jeopardizing the continuity of the USO during times of crisis, as well as all the important social and financial services provided by the post to the population.

For example, in Austria, the GPF trade union discovered temporary workers were being hired by the postal operator without being given any information or proper training during the COVID-19 breakout. These factors led to the spread of coronavirus at the parcel sorting facilities, which were then closed for 14 days in May 2020. All permanent staff were sent into quarantine and due to a lack of workers, the Austrian army had to step in to disinfect and take charge of operations.



Ireland



## Negotiate to secure workers' health and jobs



Pakistan

Trade unions must ensure they are recognized as an equal partner with postal management to effectively speak on behalf of workers and influence and control the implementation of protection measures.

Two cases of best practice during the COVID-19 pandemic include trade unions FOECYT from Argentina and SNTPT from Senegal.

The trade unions called upon the management of their USP to work with them to establish a work protocol to deal with the health emergency. In

both instances, a crisis management committee was set up to relay workers' views and needs in negotiations, as well as to monitor the situation and, if necessary, take additional action.

In Argentina, the union secured the following measures:

- 1.** Workers over 60, risk groups, pregnant women, parents of school-age children up to the age of 13, and workers having recently travelled abroad were all exempted from work.
- 2.** Teleworking was introduced where possible.
- 3.** Personal protective equipment was distributed to workers on the job.
- 4.** Deep cleaning and disinfection of commercial areas prior to opening, and the working day was cut to four consecutive hours.
- 5.** Staffing at branches was limited to a minimum, and service at the cash desk reduced by 50 per cent. This also restricted the number of customers on the premises.
- 6.** Distribution focused on priority services and maintaining and strengthening hygiene provisions. To limit contact, mail carriers were instructed to place items on the doorstep, knock on the door and wait for the client at a safe distance. For proof of delivery, the recipient's signature was replaced with the use of hand-held devices which scanned the recipient's ID card and the geolocation data of the address visited.

Nepal



*“The COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a perfect opportunity to strengthen social dialogue in the two countries. Managing the crisis by emphasising dialogue has so far yielded convincing results because postal activities are being maintained and the measures taken have helped to protect staff from danger.”*

**Ibrahima Sarr**  
SNTPT General Secretary

In Senegal, the union negotiated the following procedures:

- 1.** Provision of protective equipment such as masks and hydro-alcoholic gel to all workers.
- 2.** Exemption for staff suffering from high-risk health conditions (eg. diabetes, asthma, heart disease, etc.) as well as pregnant women and workers who were exposed to the virus.
- 3.** Implementation of a rota system to avoid a significant presence of workers in offices at the same time and ensure continuity of service.
- 4.** The right for union inspections to ensure procedures were being implemented. In case of a breach, the union reported the shortcomings and corrective measures were enforced.



## Planning

### Establish procedures with the USP to better respond to a crisis

Due to a long history of natural disasters in Japan, JPGU (Japan Postal Group Union) holds regular consultation with the Japan Post Group to discuss potential dangers and uses this channel of communication to solve issues in times of emergency. Together they have developed two different responses - one in the event of a natural disaster, and the other in the case of an infectious disease.

Both response plans are based on fundamental principles:

- 1.** Human lives come first
- 2.** All actions follow a specific manual agreed by the trade union and management
- 3.** A “safety confirmation system” promptly checks the safety of employees
- 4.** JPGU is in permanent consultation with the postal operator

The United Nations agency for post, the Universal Postal Union (UPU), has also published a Disaster Risk Management guide which gives important advice on how organizations can prepare for all type of disasters. However, the guide was drafted without consultation with trade unions and therefore lacks workers' vision. The document focuses on the need to conduct a risk assessment first and then structure a response to the potential disaster. The protocols often take the form of a five-phase plan which aims to save lives; allow the continuity of operations; and train workers.

UNI Global Union has developed an emergency checklist in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to help unions structure their needs. The IPA guidelines are based on three main demands:

### 1. Information



Workers must be regularly informed about the risks they are facing, about their rights, obligations and agreements that apply to them.

### 2. Provision



Employers must adapt the workplace and provide the necessary equipment and tools to enable workers to carry out their assignment in the safest way possible.

### 3. Action

Unions shall negotiate agreements for paid leave to cover sickness, self-isolation, childcare, and occupational accidents. These agreements must apply to all staff irrespective of their employment contract at the company. The union also has a responsibility to monitor the implementation of the agreed measures in the field. The employer must adopt tailored measures to mitigate actual and potential risk and allow workers the necessary time to fulfil their tasks during a crisis period.



Taiwan



Sri Lanka



# 6

## Internal communication

### Listen to workers

Internal communication is crucial during a crisis, and unions must have the right procedures in place to safely collect workers' fears, experiences and ideas so they can be brought to the attention of management and dealt with.

The crisis committees set up in Senegal and Argentina (mentioned in Section IV), where all matters are centralized and discussed between management and unions, provide a good example of a platform that can both voice workers' concerns and resolve problems.



Latvia



United States



Switzerland

# Pressure & promotion

## Capitalize on public support to campaign for postal workers

Building pressure by reaching out to stakeholders, politicians, the public and the media can be a successful way for trade unions to defend workers' interests. Postal services enjoy a high level of trust and the public appreciates the essential service provided by postal employees, especially in times of turmoil.

When Royal Mail announced plans to reduce the USO in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Communications Workers Union (CWU UK) went on the attack and successfully pressured the company into making a U-turn, as follows:

- 1.** CWU communicated effectively with its members on the same day of the announcement through a live Facebook session.
- 2.** CWU issued communications making it clear to members that they should not support Royal Mail's position.
- 3.** CWU publicly warned it would serve notice for strike action to defend their members and the service if Royal Mail were to go ahead with their proposal.
- 4.** CWU organized National Postal Workers' Day on 29 April 2020 to raise the importance of the essential services postal workers provide in times of crisis and made several interventions in the media to point out that Royal Mail's intention was to reduce the USO on a permanent basis.
- 5.** CWU immediately contacted the government and used the political capital that had been built through the postal workers' day.

CWU UK demonstrates that a well-driven action plan with effective communications can mount significant pressure on key decision-makers. It also shows how communicating the heroic actions of postal employees during the pandemic helped win support from the public and politicians on all sides.

Pressure can also be triggered at the international level; UNI Global Union issued a joint statement with the UPU which called for united action to protect postal workers during the pandemic. UNI & UPU urged postal operators and unions to implement the IPA protocol (described in Section V) which provides an efficient framework to protect workers on the frontline.



United Kingdom

## 8 Organizing opportunity

### Demonstrate the value of a trade union

Workers organized in unions are proven to be better protected and represented. Trade unions must seize the opportunity to showcase the value of being part of a union, especially when disaster strikes.

During a crisis, workers are more concerned for their own safety and less likely to fear management retaliation for joining a union, providing an opportunity for organizers. The coronavirus pandemic has shown that trade unions are crucial to develop and implement effective response measures to protect workers' health and safety.

It is also an ideal time to organize workers at competitors to the postal service to increase standards for workers in the private sector. This lays the foundations to further develop sectoral bargaining and tackle unfair competition, which has weakened workers' terms and conditions throughout the industry.

During the coronavirus pandemic, UNI Global Union has developed an online organizing strategy to better respond to unions' needs when workers are working from home. UNI can provide information and training should it be needed.

## 9 Contain competition

### Demand regulation to ensure the same standards apply to all

In Switzerland, logistics company DHL jumped on the increasing demand for parcel delivery during the pandemic to push for new legislation to allow for Sunday deliveries. Had it come into effect; it would have further increased unfair competition to the Swiss postal operator which can only deliver six days a week.

As seen, crises and disasters are also an opportunity for competitors to intensify their market penetration and concentrate on more profitable services. However, this increases pressure on the USP, which carries the duty of the USO.



# 10 The role of the state

## Defend post as a public service

A well-financed, state-backed postal service is key to building resilience. Providing additional financial and social services supported by state funding can help a nation and its population be better prepared for a crisis.

La Poste France has introduced a successful extension of the USO and delivers four “services publiques” which help citizens and are key to maintaining workers’ jobs:

- 1.** The Universal Service Obligation includes collection and delivery six days a week throughout France. It comprises postal items up to 2 kg, parcels up to 20 kg, and registered and declared value items.
- 2.** Some 95 per cent of the population have access to a post office contact point that is less than five kilometres or twenty minutes by car from their home. Hence, La Poste contributes to regional development and makes its services accessible to all French people
- 3.** A banking service which enables all citizens to have access to a basic savings account.
- 4.** A press transport and distribution service guaranteeing equal access to information.

Greece



Japan has also entrusted the post with an extension of the USO and it is obliged to provide certain banking and life insurance services.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how post can provide valuable social services to the public, such as checking on the elderly, providing meals to isolated people, and delivering medicines and emergency payments. In order to sustain postal activity, there is a clear need to diversify the services the post provides. Unions must push other stakeholders to reconsider the core definitions of the USO.

