

One Year Later

Chicago Post Office Still Fails to Deliver for Latinos

By Heidi Ernst

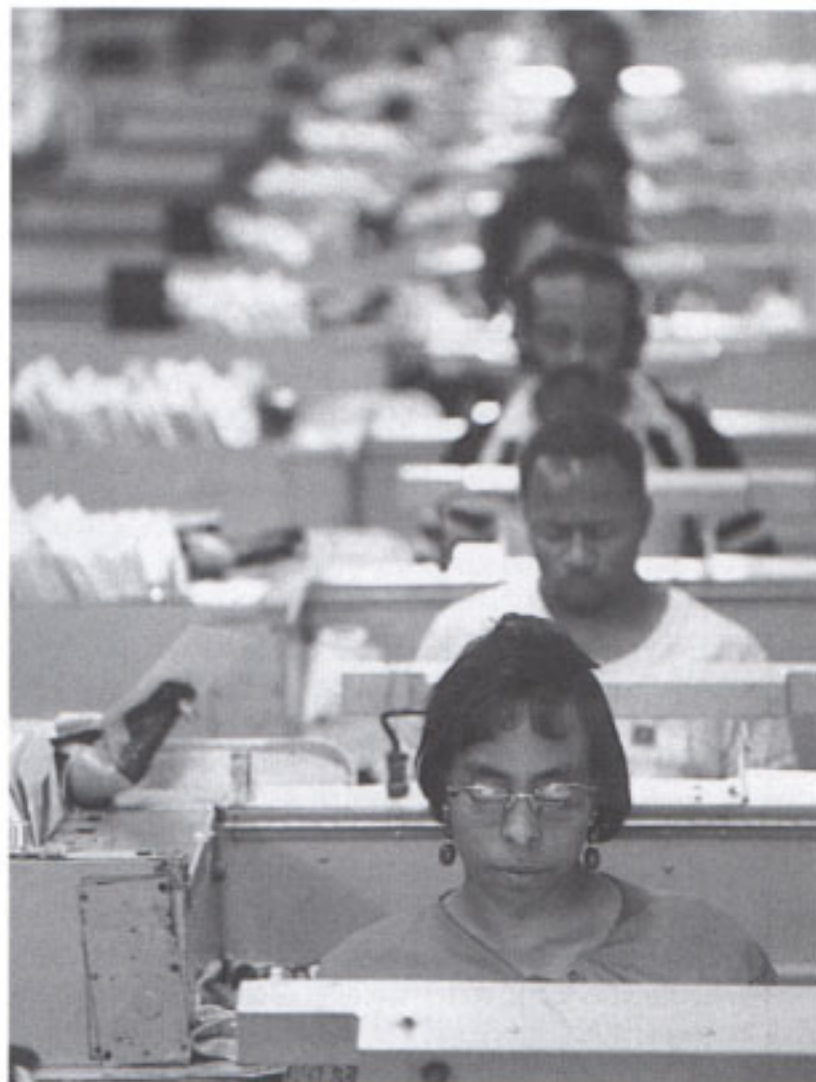
Despite recent gains in hiring, Latinos at the Chicago post office continue to be harassed and passed over for promotion, postal workers and community leaders charge.

While Latinos make up 18.8 percent of mail handlers and carriers hired since March, they hold just 2.6 percent of the jobs in upper management. As of July, four Latinos were working as supervisors at the post office, compared to 99 blacks and 49 whites, postal records show. A fifth Latino was promoted in August.

The increased hiring of Latinos is a good sign, said Juan Roberto Daly, a purchasing specialist with a 32-year postal career.

"The top managers can't be satisfied to say, 'Well, we have raised the number of Hispanics,' and then close their eyes," said Daly, who in March won a discrimination case against the post office. "They have to change the environment."

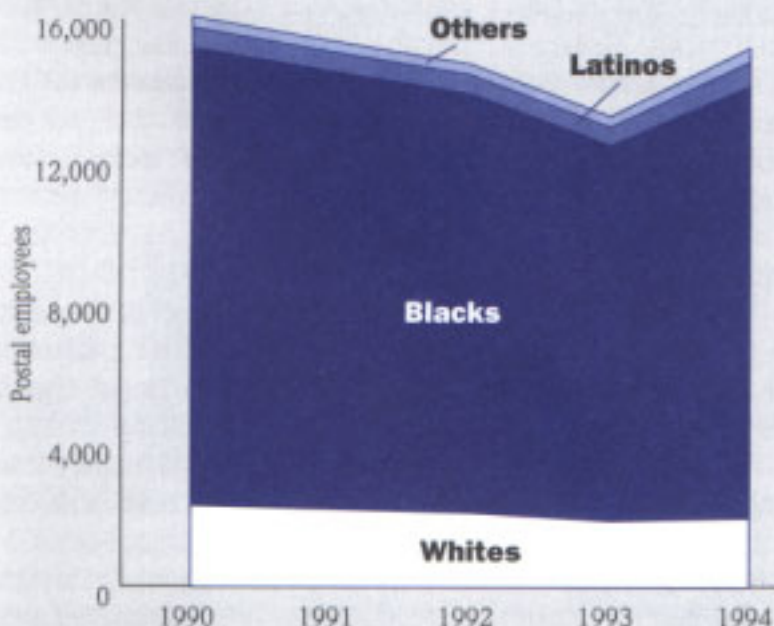
One year ago, the U.S. General Accounting Office released its study of Latino hiring, retention and promotion throughout the



Despite recent gains, Latinos are still severely underrepresented among the Chicago post office's 15,000 employees.

Post Office Employees

Latino employment has increased 17.8 percent since 1990, mostly due to 171 workers hired in fiscal year 1994. During the same time, black employment declined 5.5 percent and white employment dropped 15.5 percent. Yet, Latinos comprise only 4.5 percent of all postal employees. Blacks comprise 80 percent and whites are 12.9 percent of all employees.



Source: U.S. General Accounting Office and U.S. Postal Service. Figures are for the end of the federal fiscal year, except for 1994, which are as of July 22. "Others" include Asian Americans and American Indians.

U.S. Postal Service. The study was requested by U.S. Rep. Luis V. Gutierrez, a Chicago Democrat. In August, The Chicago Reporter analyzed updated numbers from the post office.

The latest figures show that while Latinos make up 11 percent of private sector employees in the metropolitan area, they account for only 4.5 percent of the district's 15,000 career postal employees. Blacks account for 80 percent of all postal workers. Whites are 12.9 percent, Asian Americans are 2.4 percent, American Indians are 0.1 percent, and the disabled are 4 percent of employees.

Last December, the Chicago post office responded with a "Hispanic Action Plan" to boost Latino hiring, promotion and recruitment, and to provide additional services for Spanish-speaking customers. It set no timetable to reach those goals.

Rufus Porter, who was named Chicago District manager/postmaster on May 12, said his first priority is to fix the widespread delivery problems. But carrying out the action plan—including the goal of making Latinos 11 percent of the work force—follows closely behind, he said.

"Underrepresentation leaves a sense of concern," Porter said. "Our report card is the civilian labor force. ... We need to reach that goal. And here in Chicago we haven't come anywhere close to it up until recent efforts."

But hiring issues account for only part of the plan. The remaining goals—keeping and promoting Latinos, and putting more Spanish-speaking window clerks in Latino neighborhoods are the hardest to achieve.

Latino activists say many of their efforts are stymied by the underlying tension between black and Latino workers.

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"African Americans believe they have a stronghold at the post office," said John Rodriguez, a mail handler who says he was unfairly fired in 1991 and is suing to get his job back. "If they give up some of their (spots), they feel they're going to jeopardize their jobs," he said.

But charges of racial tension are "totally unfounded," said Tyrone Johnson, union steward at the downtown post office for the National Mail Handlers Union Local 306. "The only tension I know of is between employees and management as far as how they're running the place."

Getting In

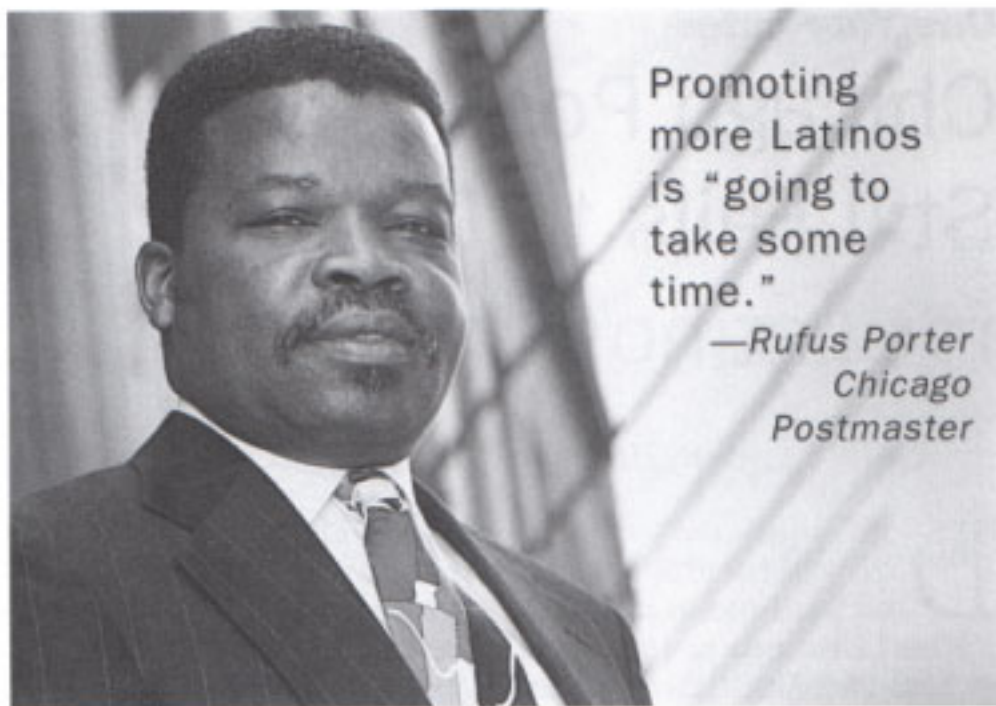
Every three years, the U.S. Postal Service gives an employment test in each of its 85 districts. In Chicago the last test was offered from Nov. 28 to March 4. It attracted 30,049 people, including more than 5,000 Latinos, said Carmen Santiago, the Chicago District bilingual customer relations coordinator.

Applicants were tested on address checking and memorization, recognizing numbers in a series and following directions. Their scores made them eligible for up to seven jobs systemwide: clerk, carrier, distribution clerk, sorter machine operator, markup clerk, mail handler and mail processor.

Thousands of Latinos prepared for the test by attending workshops organized by the Chicago office; some sessions were conducted in Spanish. Passing scores were given to 4,356 Latinos.

Success on the test has translated into jobs. Of 777 new mail carriers and handlers hired since the test, 146 are Latino, Santiago said. As of Aug. 6, Latinos accounted for 18.2 percent of the 490 new carriers, and 19.9 percent of 287 handlers, she said.

Those numbers are significantly better than previous hiring totals. From 1990 to 1993, Latinos accounted for 54 of 1,185 new employees, or 4.6 percent. In the same period, the Chicago district



Promoting more Latinos is "going to take some time."

—Rufus Porter
Chicago
Postmaster

hired 899 blacks, 167 whites and 65 other minorities.

"This is a definite positive upward move for the Latino community," said Marco Acosta, employment specialist at the Spanish Coalition for Jobs, who said he recruited 500 post office applicants. But others complain that the gains are temporary and will do little to break the hiring pattern.

"I have been going round and round in circles for 15 years with the post office," said Bill Luna, executive director of Image de Chicago, a Latino civil rights organization for government employees. "The first people to know about positions are inside and they tell their friends and relatives."

Latino underrepresentation is worst among the 155 employees in upper management. As of July, blacks accounted for 63.9 percent of postal supervisors; whites were 31.7 percent. In contrast, Latinos were 2.5 percent.

"We have not done a good job in preparing individuals for upward mobility in this city," Porter said. "We're addressing that now. But just like any other training process, it's going to take some time."

Chicago will recruit Latinos from other districts for management posts, he said.

Yet the lack of Latino employees is a nationwide post office problem, the General Accounting Office found. The problem is worse in Chicago than in Los Angeles, the GAO report said. The post office in New York, the third city studied, has a higher percentage of Latino employees than does the private sector in New York.

Equal Employment

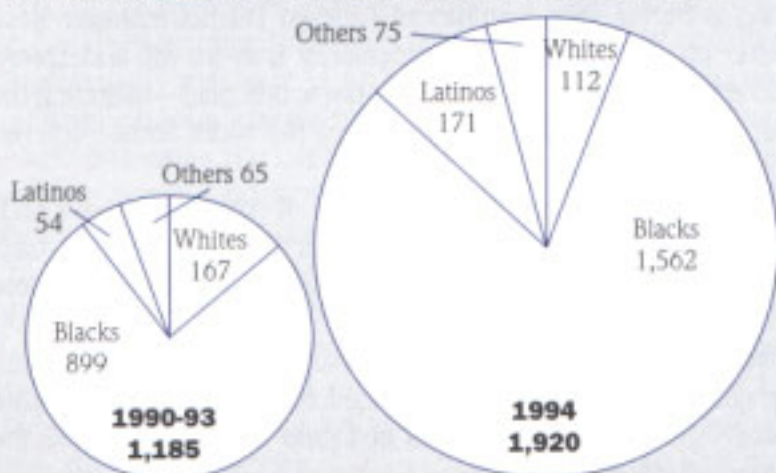
In 1977, Latinos were 1.3 percent of the employees in the Chicago post office, according to an August 1986 story in the Reporter. By 1986, Latinos were 2.7 percent of the 14,900 postal employees.

While Latinos increased, blacks increased even more, despite an 8 percent reduction in the total work force. Blacks held 73 percent of post office jobs in 1977 and 83 percent in 1986.

In the late 1970s, Purchasing Specialist Daly filed 11 equal employment opportunity complaints against his supervisors, including charges that he had been downgraded on work evaluations without being told. He also asked to be transferred to another station, which took four years.

Posting New Hires

Latinos comprise 8.9 percent of the employees hired by the Chicago post office this year. During the four previous years combined, Latinos were just 4.5 percent of the new hires.



Source: U.S. General Accounting Office and U.S. Postal Service. Figures are for the entire federal fiscal year, except for 1994, which are as of July 22. A fifth Latino worker was promoted in August.



"My original EEO counselor told me to 'file, file, file, because then they won't bother you,'" Daly said. But now he believes that employees who file complaints are "blackballed."

In 1989, Daly filed two complaints when he was passed over for a promotion. Two later charges accused his supervisors of retaliation after he filed the complaints.

He represented himself in his case before the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. During the five years the case was pending, Daly was demoted from a grade 23 to a grade 20 supervisor.

In March, the commission ruled in Daly's favor, and ordered the post office to promote him, give him back pay from 1989 and restore his title of purchasing specialist/team leader. So far he has regained half the title and none of the pay. The post office asked to remove the complaints from his record, but he refused.

"Resolutions won't happen because management will look bad," Daley said. "They look at [a complaint] as a gripe, not a situation to be resolved."

In an Oct. 4 letter, EEOC officials warned the post office that

compliance with their decision was "long overdue," and threatened to take "enforcement action."

Porter would not comment on Daly's case, saying "This is a headquarters issue."

Daly's outspokenness is the exception to the rule. Many Latinos suffer their discrimination silently, he said. "Because a lot of them don't want to get fired, they stay quiet."

Angelo Gonzalez, who started as a mail handler in 1966, has been an acting supervisor since 1982.

When Gonzalez complained two years ago, he said his manager assured him he was next in line to be made a full-time supervisor. In August, five people—including two Latinos—were promoted ahead of him.

"I trained so many supervisors, 20 to 30 people who come from nowhere," Gonzalez said. "They're not more qualified than me."

Gonzalez said he was talked out of filing a complaint by Victor M. Reyes, a counselor and investigator for the district's EEO office. Santiago told him to write a letter to the local postmaster, he said.

Reyes said he would never dissuade anyone from filing a complaint. Santiago said she tries to resolve problems directly. "If I have an employee with a problem, I try to get management involved or visit the station to find out what's going on," she said.

Few Latino workers file internal EEO complaints, records show. Latinos filed only three of 76 complaints against the Chicago post office in 1990. They filed 11 of 103 complaints last year, and had filed six of 64 cases as of July.

Porter said no employee should be discouraged from lodging a formal complaint.

Bad Blood

Latino employees say that statistics don't fully illustrate the discrimination they face on the job.

Calls to 12 current and former Latino post office employees elicited a wide range of comments, from "no systematic discrimination" and "no problems" to a picture of "obvious discrimination" by blacks against Latinos and whites, and "favoritism." One said, "It's a big ghetto in there."

Victor Vazquez, a carrier at the Cragin station, started at the post office in 1966, moved to California three years later, and returned to Chicago in 1983.

"I love my job," Vazquez said, "(but the) discrimination against Latinos and whites has been kind of obvious."

"Discrimination is something that we don't tolerate, not in this organization," Porter said. "To say that it absolutely doesn't happen, I can't sit here and tell you that. But ... when it is brought to our attention, we deal with it."

In September 1993, John Rodriguez sued Hardy Williams, general president of Local 306 of the Mail Handlers Union. He charges that the union failed to defend him after his 1991 firing after fighting with a white worker who he said had harassed him for a year.

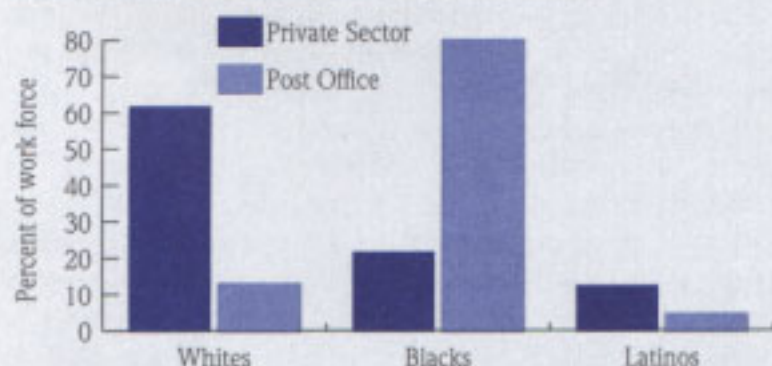
Rodriguez, a 3-year employee, is also pursuing an EEOC complaint over his firing. On Oct 7, he met with a post office EEO counselor after the EEOC sent the case back for further investigation.

"The system is designed to exhaust you," he said. "The bureau-

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Employment Report Card

Latinos are severely underrepresented in the Chicago post office work force, compared to the private sector.



Source: U.S. Postal Service. Of all postal employees, 2.4 percent are Asian American, while 0.1 percent are American Indians. Asian Americans are 3.7 percent and Indians are 0.17 percent of private sector employees. Comparisons are to the Chicago Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area, which is composed of Cook, DeKalb, DuPage, Grundy, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry and Will counties.

Pardo Named McCormick Fellow

On Aug. 22 Natalie Pardo joined the Reporter as the fourth recipient of McCormick Tribune Foundation's Minority Fellowship in Urban Journalism. Pardo



Natalie Pardo

previously worked as city editor, features editor and reporter in her four years at the *Chicago Defender*. Pardo, 31, has won several journalism awards, including honors from the National Newspaper Publishers Association in 1991 and 1992. She received a bachelor's degree in English from Georgetown University in 1987. Pardo lives in west suburban Forest Park.

She replaces Ray Quintanilla, the Reporter's previous McCormick fellow,

who joined the Chicago Tribune in June as a general assignment reporter. The fellowship is funded by the McCormick Tribune Foundation.

Kelli Worley, 28, who has been an intern and research assistant for the Reporter since September 1993, has signed on as community affairs director and morning news producer for WXRT-FM in Chicago.

Former intern Marvln Reed is returning to the Reporter as circulation manager. Reed, 24, received her bachelor's degree in journalism from Columbia College in 1993. She also served as correspondent for the *Southtown Economist* newspaper.

Current intern Mary Abowd has been promoted to research assistant.

The Editorial Board also has a new addition: Marisa Alicea, an assistant professor at the School of New Learning at DePaul University.

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cracy is loaded with armies of attorneys."

Union officials would not comment on Rodriguez' case, but union steward Johnson said: "We're trained to defend all mail handlers. We don't look at race."

Next Step

At this year's rate, it would take the post office until 2003 to reach its goal of 11 percent Latino employment.

As for the remaining goals, Porter said the post office will begin offering translation services through an AT&T Language Line in December and is drafting a Spanish-language brochure for lower-level employees.

Hiring bilingual window clerks at stations in Spanish-speaking neighborhoods such as Logan Square and Pilsen will take

longer, he said. Window clerk jobs are awarded by seniority, and the union has refused to give an advantage to newer, bilingual employees, Santiago said.

The union has been "very gracious" by allowing the post office to hire temporary translators in certain stations, Porter said. "The union would give us total hell if we deviated and put in a permanent person" as a bilingual clerk.

Gutierrez will observe the first anniversary of the Hispanic Action Plan with a public meeting in December. He is "less unhappy" after seeing recent hiring statistics, but "it is certainly only a drop in the bucket," he said. "The system's got to want to do it."

But Daly is pessimistic that post office management will change the widespread prejudice.

And Latinos have their work cut out for them, he said. "The Hispanics who are here have to be more active."

Contributing: Tom Corfman

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