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Postal Workers Win: Sears Won't Sell Stamps; Union Worried That Mini-Post Offices Would Cost Jobs

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Under pressure from the American Postal Workers Union, Sears Roebuck & Co. cried uncle yesterday, tossing Uncle Sam out of 11 Sears stores in the Midwest where its employees were running "mini-post offices" under what the U.S. Postal Service had envisioned as a model for a nationwide cost-saving effort.

The vision of Sears workers selling postage stamps had infuriated the 365,000-member Postal Workers Union, and yesterday Sears officials said they would close the post offices rather than continue to risk the union's ire.

"We prefer to remove ourselves from an issue that should be resolved by the postal workers and the Postal Service," said Mary Jean Houde, a spokeswoman for Sears, the nation's largest retailer.

"It's time for management to wake up and smell the coffee," said Moe Biller, president of the postal workers union, in a victory statement hailing the Sears' announcement as "proof of what unions can accomplish."

Union members had mailed the company thousands of letters of protest, some containing torn Sears credit cards. Biller had threatened a national boycott of Sears stores, telling the company's chairman, Edward A. Brennan, to "brace yourself. ... We're mad as hell and we're not going to take it anymore."

Postal officials said they were unbowed and would continue the program by contracting with individual merchants in large shopping malls across the country. "We're going right ahead," said Gordon C. Morison, assistant postmaster general for philatelic and retail service.

Despite the furor that the postal union created, Morison said the Postal Service considered the Sears operation a success. "It was a win-win-win situation. It was win for the consumer with a one-stop shop and ship service, a win for Sears, which increased traffic in most of its stores, and a win for the Postal Service, which was able to offer increased convenience to our customers," he said.

The Postal Service has steadily expanded programs to sell its stamps outside of established Post Offices, often through contracts with major supermarket chains. But to the union, the 10 mini-post offices in the Chicago area and one in Madison, Wis., were a direct threat to its members' jobs.

The thousands of form letters the postal workers sent to Sears chairman Brennan said, "It's no secret that

Sears has fallen on hard times," and went on to accuse the giant retailer of turning to the Postal Service "to rescue you from your corporate nosedive."

Sears had agreed to conduct a year-long test of the mini-post offices. Sears officials said they considered the project a success and described it as "very popular with our customers." The mini-post offices offered most of the services provided by Post Offices.

Labor accounts for about 83 percent of the Postal Service's costs, and the service has made no secret of wanting to hold those costs down and avoid future rate increases. Morison said the service had assured postal unions that the Sears project would not cost any postal workers' jobs.

All of the Sears post office outlets will close by Oct. 1, the end of the test year, the Postal Service said.

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