

NALC looks back at the 1970 postal strike

This year, as the nation once again considers the future of the Postal Service and the letter carrier profession, letter carriers are looking back to the Great Postal Strike of 42 years ago for inspiration.

“The letter carriers who risked so much to stand up for their rights knew that they had to stick together,” said NALC President Fredric Rolando. “In New York, when the first group voted to strike, they didn’t all go in the room agreeing on their course of action. But they all left the room ready to act as one. That’s the power of a union.”

In 1970, letter carriers had minimal collective-bargaining rights restricted to local issues. Pay, benefits and working conditions lagged behind the rest of the workforce—some carriers even qualified for welfare. Pushed to the limit, carriers at New York Branch 36 voted on March 17, 1970, to walk off the job. One of their leaders, who held no official office in the branch at the time, was a letter carrier named Vincent Sombrotto, who would later become president of NALC.

This was no ordinary strike, because it was technically illegal. With no collective-bargaining rights, postal workers were not covered by laws regulating labor relations, and striking was a fireable offense. In fact, any letter carrier, especially a prominent leader of the strike, could have faced prosecution and jail time.

Support for the strike was far from universal—the vote on the walkout was 1,555 to 1,055. But the next morning, nearly every letter carrier either stayed home or showed up with a picket sign instead of a satchel.

The impact of their unity became clear very quickly as the mail piled up.

Court injunctions ordering the strikers to return to work were issued, and ignored. The strike spread throughout the New York City area. Thousands of clerks, drivers and other postal workers refused to cross picket lines, effectively joining the strike.

President Richard Nixon ordered 25,000 National Guard soldiers to case and carry the mail. All this accomplished, though, was to strengthen the hand of letter carriers. Try as they might, the National Guardsmen weren’t ready to step in and perform letter carrier duties. The mail piled up more, and mail that did reach mailboxes often ended up in the wrong ones.

But the endgame was clear when the strike began to spread beyond New York. In less than

a week after the first letter carriers walked out, branches in several other cities had voted to join them. By March 23, thousands more letter carriers nationwide had joined the strike or were poised to.

The Post Office Department negotiated with the union throughout the strike, and when it seemed a breakthrough was likely, the letter carriers put down their signs and returned to work. It had taken only a week, and a shutdown in only a small portion of the country, to make their point. The Nixon administration, Congress and the public now understood that letter carriers do a difficult but essential job under tight deadlines and stressful conditions, and that they deserved better.

A few weeks later, NALC and the Post Office reached an agreement that included pay raises. More importantly, Congress acted quickly to reorganize the Post Office into a new, self-sustaining U.S. Postal Service—with collective-bargaining rights for its employees. Letter carriers finally had a voice.

NALC President James Rademacher was on hand when President Nixon signed the postal reorganization law on Aug. 17, 1970. That law’s opening statement still rings true today:

“The United States Postal Service shall be operated as a basic and fundamental service provided to the people by the Government of the United States, authorized by the Constitution, created by Act of Congress, and supported by the people. The Postal Service shall have as its basic function the obligation to provide postal services to bind the Nation together through the personal, educational, literary, and business correspondence of the people. It shall provide prompt, reliable, and efficient services to patrons in all areas and shall render postal services to all communities.” ☒

