

Interviewing Vincent Sombrotto



Philip
Dine

I had just started covering labor at a metro newspaper in the Midwest a quarter-century ago, one founded by the original Joseph Pulitzer and still run at the time by the third-generation Joseph Pulitzer, when an editor felt the need to have a conversation about certain aspects of my coverage.

The paper had hired me to cover the local unions—electricians, carpenters, Teamsters and the like—he gently reminded me. It seemed that I barely knew the names of the local leaders, but instead was spending a lot of time talking with some New York fellow who was president of the National

Association of Letter Carriers.

Nothing wrong with eventually expanding our coverage to the national level, my editor said, but it might be advisable to start with the local scene, where our readers, after all, lived and worked.

Oh, and by the way, he added, why was I writing so much about this Vincent Sombrotto?

Because, I said, he's a font of interesting and creative ideas about labor, he's a force within the American labor movement, and for some reason he's accessible to us.

Vince Sombrotto helped buttress the case shortly thereafter by coming to St. Louis for an NALC meeting, then taking part in a sit-down protest against Greyhound, which produced a good-sized news story and a dramatic photo.

I wasn't sure why Vince Sombrotto was willing to talk with a reporter at a mid-sized newspaper far from the nation's capital—perhaps it was the shrinking number of U.S. labor reporters, the importance of the St. Louis letter carriers branch, or maybe the shared New York accent—but whatever the reason, I certainly was glad on several counts.

It helped convince my editors that we should define the labor beat broadly, not only in terms of geography but also thematically—including labor's social and political activities, in which Vince Sombrotto was fully engaged.

It surely helped break the ice with those local labor leaders I was supposed to report on but who initially were distrustful of the media; if a nationally prominent union president/vice president of the AFL-CIO was will-

ing to open up to a St. Louis reporter, why shouldn't they?

By providing insight into labor trends and developments at the national level, it helped put into perspective what was happening locally.

And, it allowed me entrée into the thinking and actions of a dynamic leader who was as innovative in his approach as he was passionate about the members he served.

I didn't know much about the internal workings of the NALC at that point, because I mainly spoke with Vince Sombrotto about broad issues such as the direction of the national labor movement or legislation and politics. But more than two decades later when I ended up here, I realized why he was so dedicated to the rank-and-file letter carriers who compose this union—men and women who contribute so much to the economy, to the communities they serve, and to the civic life of this country.

And I've learned something else as well—that the extraordinarily engaged and informed members of this union get the leaders they deserve, something that did not stop with President Sombrotto. The president I serve, Fredric Rolando, differs in many ways from Vince Sombrotto, as do the times in which the two men presided over the NALC, but Fred Rolando is no less impassioned about this union and its members, no less resolute as a leader, no less talented as a tactician—and no less inspiring in terms of setting goals and motivating people to achieve those goals.

When I began talking with Vince Sombrotto those many years ago, I had no idea that I would one day work in a building named for him, that I would work with the folks here and around the country who were like family to him. But I am glad I do.

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