

NALC PRESIDENT EMERITUS

VINCENT R. SOMBROTTO

1923 — 2013

Above: Sombrotto took NALC's case to the public by picketing in 1996.

Below: Speaking from the floor during the 50th Biennial Convention in 1976.



Vincent R. Sombrotto, 89, a towering figure in the history of the National Association of Letter Carriers and one of the most significant U.S. labor leaders of recent decades, died on Jan. 10.

As a rank-and-file letter carrier at Grand Central Station in New York City, Sombrotto assumed leadership of the pivotal 1970 wildcat postal strike that led directly to the creation of the modern United States Postal Service.

The following year, he was elected president of NALC Branch 36 in New York City. Seven years later, he was elected as NALC's 16th national president, a position he would hold from 1978 to 2002.

His seven-term tenure atop the union was marked by extraordinary changes in the letter carrier craft and by remarkable progress for letter carriers. He also served as a vice president of the AFL-CIO.

"Vince's long tenure and tireless work for this union, at both the local and national levels, has left a lasting,

positive impact on all the men and women who have carried the mail since the Great Postal Strike, and on those who will do so in the decades yet to come," NALC President Fredric V. Rolando said.

"The deep sadness we all feel at his passing mixes with the fond and happy memories of him that those of us he touched will carry with us for the rest of our lives," Rolando said.

Sombrotto was born in New York City on June 15, 1923. He joined what was then the Post Office Department in 1947 as a part-time letter carrier after serving with distinction in the Navy in World War II.

In 1970, New York City letter carriers walked off their federal jobs—risking arrest in what was effectively a strike against the U.S. government—to protest dismal working conditions and poverty-level wages that entitled some to federal assistance programs. Subsequently, carriers and other postal employees in one city after another across the country joined the strike. President

Richard Nixon called in the troops to deliver the mail, but they proved unable to carry out the task in an effective manner. The walkout eventually resulted in the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970, with full collective-bargaining rights for all postal employees.

Though he held no union office at the time, Sombrotto's personal charisma, street smarts and military background led to his taking charge and to other carriers following his lead.

His seven-term tenure atop the national union was marked by extraordinary changes in the letter carrier craft and by remarkable progress for letter carriers. As national president and chief contract negotiator, Sombrotto led the NALC in seven highly productive rounds of collective bargaining that provided basic wage increases in every contract, preserved uncapped cost-of-living adjustments and improved letter carrier working conditions. His efforts made the carrier's job a more rewarding and satisfying one, and they made the NALC a stronger, more united union, well-equipped to meet the challenges it faced.

Sombrotto's many achievements as NALC president included turning the union's political action fund, the Committee on Letter Carrier Political Education (COLCPE), into one of the largest and most effective political action committees in the labor movement while dramatically improving the union's political and legislative operations. Under his leadership in 1993, the NALC played a critical role in winning reform of the Hatch Act, breaking the political shackles that made letter carriers and other federal employees second-class citizens for more than 50 years.

A firm believer in civic responsibility, Sombrotto tirelessly promoted the letter carrier tradition of assisting those in need. His active support of the Muscular Dystrophy Association helped raise tens of millions of dollars to fight the ravages of neuromuscular diseases. In 1992, he began the NALC Food Drive, which has developed into the country's largest one-day food drive. Held the second Saturday every May, it has to date provided more than 1.2 billion pounds of food for food

banks in communities throughout the nation, with letter carriers collecting non-perishable food that postal patrons leave near their mailboxes.

Knowing that carriers are both familiar with and dedicated to the communities they serve, Sombrotto and the NALC joined forces with the U.S. Postal Service, local United Ways and emergency services organizations to establish Carrier Alert, a nationwide program where carriers can watch over elderly or housebound postal customers.

A great many letter carriers perform heroic and humanitarian deeds on their routes, saving lives, putting out fires, finding missing children and stopping crimes, something recognized annually by Sombrotto, and every NALC president since, with the NALC Heroes of the Year awards.

Sombrotto retired from national office in 2002. He remained engaged in the service of his beloved union, taking part in many national conventions as well as in a special video commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Great Postal Strike. His last appearance was at the National Rap Session in Las Vegas in October of 2011.

Sombrotto, who passed away from natural causes, is survived by his wife Rae, by seven grown children and by 14 grandchildren. Condolences can be sent to Mrs. Sombrotto and family at: 24 Soundview Drive, Port Washington, NY 11050. Donations in lieu of flowers can be made to the National Kidney Foundation.

The following pages reflect the legacy of Sombrotto's service to the NALC.



Top: Sombrotto announced his retirement at the National Convention in 2002.

Above: Sombrotto discusses a point with President Bill Clinton.



The Sombrotto family watched as Vince was honored with a bust at the 2008 National Convention.



DELIVERING LEADERSHIP

As a letter carrier at Grand Central Station in New York City, Vince Sombrotto rose to a leadership position in Branch 36 during the 1970 Wildcat Postal Strike.

Risking arrest, New York City letter carriers went on strike against the federal government to protest poverty-level wages and dismal working conditions. Soon city carriers across the United States, in defiance of NALC's national leaders' reluctance to act, joined the strike. The walkout that began in New York eventually resulted in the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970, with full collective-bargaining rights for all postal employees.

Sombrotto and his Rank and File movement quickly took over the leadership of Branch 36 on a platform of giving individual letter carriers a political voice in their own union. Installed as Branch 36 President in 1971, Sombrotto worked tirelessly to broaden carrier participation in union affairs, to promote post office safety, to convert subs to full-time status, and to improve working conditions and benefits for retirees.

When their objectives began to resonate and Rank and File tickets started winning branch elections across the country, Sombrotto and his supporters turned their sights on the national-level NALC—introducing convention resolutions to replace the proxy system with one member, one vote democracy, to have national business agents elected by the members they serve, and to require membership ratification of national collective-bargaining agreements. By 1978, all of these policies had been adopted by national conventions and Vincent R. Sombrotto was overwhelmingly elected NALC's national president.



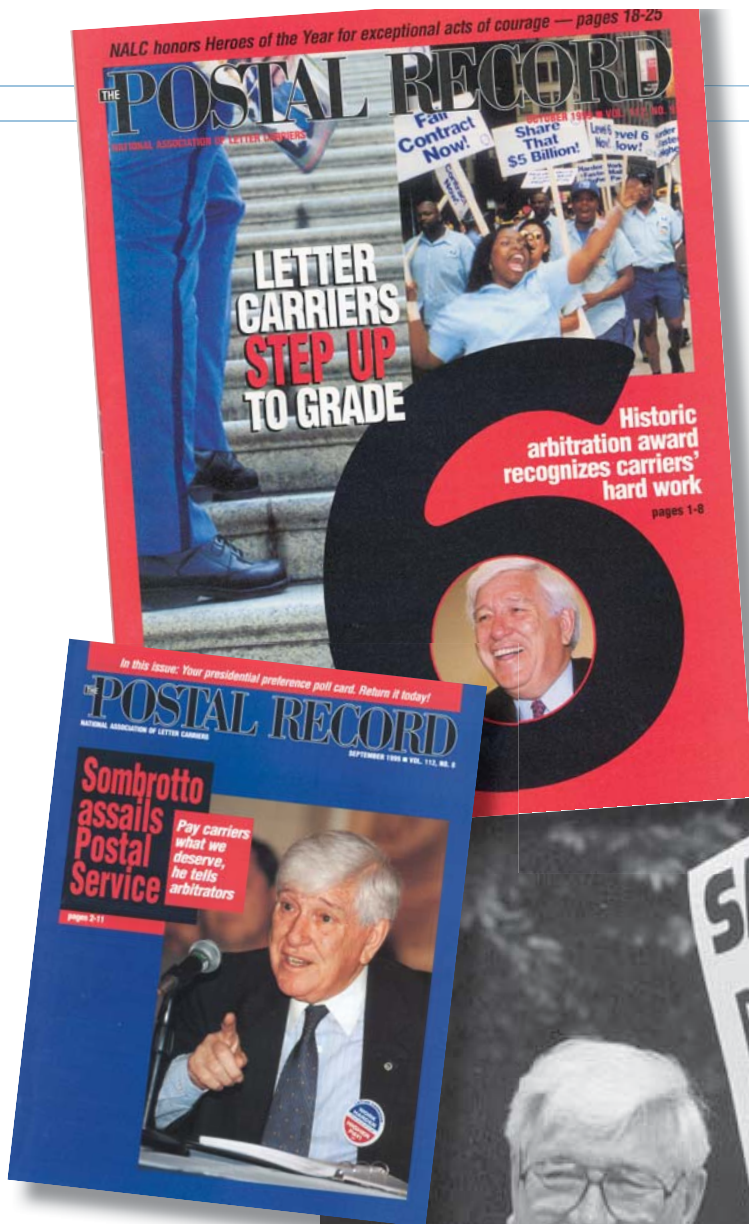
Top: The 6th Biennial Convention in Orlando
Above: Politicking at the 1976 convention

Right: After being elected national president, Sombrotto returned to his route in New York City to keep in touch with members on the work-room floor.



"Sombrotto & Co. win by landslide" was the mock *New York Daily News* headline predicting the Rank and File victories to come.

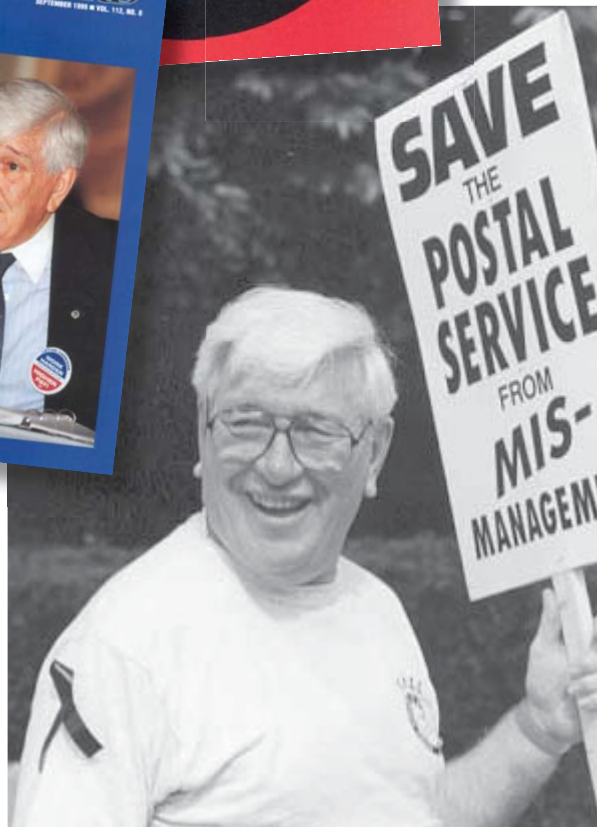
DELIVERING CONTRACT GAINS



Above: Issues of *The Postal Record* as NALC fought for, and gained, a step up to Grade 6.

Right: When talk wasn't enough, Sombrotto led carriers to the picket lines, as in 1996.

Below: Sombrotto exchanged contract proposals with Postmaster General Tony Frank in 1990.



From protecting the cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) and job security to improving working conditions and upgrading city delivery letter carriers to Level 6 pay, President Sombrotto worked with steady determination to ensure constant improvements for carriers and their families.

Beginning with the 1981 contract, he steered the union through seven difficult and often contentious negotiations—three ended in negotiated agreements overwhelmingly ratified by the membership; the other four were settled by arbitration panels. Over those years, the collective-bargaining relationship between NALC and the Postal Service often was characterized by fierce management resistance and aggressive anti-union public relations campaigns. Despite these obstacles, Sombrotto consistently beat back USPS' regressive demands by using worker rallies, informational pickets and advertising campaigns to mobilize NALC members and present letter carriers' positions directly to the American public.

Throughout 20 years of collective bargaining—two decades when most American workers lost ground—President Sombrotto and his negotiations teams stopped management from cutting or freezing wages, eliminating COLAs, and compelling carriers to pay more for benefits, while also achieving basic wage increases and improving working conditions.



DELIVERING POLITICAL CLOUT

Beginning in January 1979, President Sombrotto turned a skeletal grassroots legislative network, a cash-strapped political action fund and a shadowy presence on Capitol Hill into one of the nation's most powerful legislative and political programs—one capable of both defending letter carriers' benefits and programs and ensuring the future of the Postal Service.

For more than two decades under his leadership the union waged fierce—and seemingly endless—budget battles, defending carrier pay and benefits while working to preserve the Postal Service. During his term of office, the union won reform of the onerous Hatch Act that for a half century had limited postal and federal employees' participation in the political process. And, with his eyes on the future of letter carrier jobs, President Sombrotto moved the union to the forefront of the debate over reform of the Postal Reorganization Act—calling for meaningful postal reform.

To achieve these goals, President Sombrotto assembled over the years an integrated political and legislative program that combines a highly professional training program, COLCPE—a robust political action fund that now raises about \$6.3 million during each election cycle—and a highly skilled and professional Washington, DC, lobbying presence.



Above: Sombrotto met with President George W. Bush in the Oval Office in 2001 to discuss the anthrax crisis.
Right: Meeting with President Jimmy Carter

No battle was more fiercely fought than Hatch Act reform to restore the political rights of letter carriers. Above, Rep. Gary Ackerman “apprehended” Sombrotto in 1987 for violating the Hatch Act after the Reagan administration harassed Sombrotto and two other union presidents with Hatch Act charges. The long struggle ended with victory in 1993, celebrated on the Capitol steps (at top).

DELIVERING COMMUNITY SERVICE

Vince Sombrotto demonstrated an exceptional understanding of the letter carrier tradition of helping those in need, a tradition based on the unique position of trust carriers have in the communities they serve. Whether encouraging fund-raising for charities, volunteering time and resources to community projects, or highlighting the actions of carriers who perform daily acts of heroism on their routes, President Sombrotto was pivotal in inspiring NALC members to embrace that special sense of civic responsibility.

President Sombrotto's active support of the union's Muscular Dystrophy Association campaign helped generate millions of dollars for research and treatment of neuromuscular diseases. In 1992, convinced that more had to be done about the growing problem of hunger in America, he launched NALC's National Food Drive. The drive has grown into be the largest one-day food collection event in the country, reaching all 50 states and thousands of communities, and feeding literally millions of hungry children and adults each year.

Knowing that carriers care deeply about their communities, President Sombrotto and the NALC joined forces with the Postal Service, United Way and local emergency services to establish Carrier Alert, a nationwide program to watch over elderly or housebound postal customers. But letter carriers do more than watch—they often perform heroic or humanitarian deeds on their routes, which President Sombrotto recognized annually with the NALC Heroes of the Year awards. **PR**



Top: Sombrotto with one of the thousands helped by members' hard work for, and support of, the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

Middle: Sombrotto and Jerry Lewis thanked NALC fund-raising champs during the annual Labor Day MDA Telethon.

Above: President Ronald Reagan presented the medal for the 1986 President's Volunteer Action Award for the Carrier Alert program.

Right: The "kids and corn flakes" kickoff ceremony for an early national food drive.

