

What prompted the Great Postal Strike?

Celebrating the 44th anniversary of the walkout in New York City

It can be difficult for letter carriers to understand what it was like for our brethren to have launched, at 12:01 a.m. on March 18, 1970, what is now called the Great Postal Strike. Today, we are guaranteed a decent wage and benefits, are protected from management abuses, and are represented by a strong union. But it wasn't always like that.

Letter carriers in the late 1960s were poorly paid and denied collective-bargaining rights. Their low pay and benefits were dictated by Post Office managers and a negligent Congress.

Postal workers had suffered a 50-year losing streak beginning with World War I. Pay scales were frozen, then cut back, and even the prosperity of the 1950s passed them by as President Dwight Eisenhower vetoed four bills to raise postal salaries. By 1967, things were so bad that post office job turnover was around 25 percent a year, unsurprising with many carriers having to work a second job or take food stamps to support themselves and their families. Letter carriers became increasingly frustrated about being bullied and denied a living wage.

Our union, the National Association of Letter Carriers, was caught between a political rock and a legal hard place. Congress was incapable of raising wages and letter carriers couldn't go on strike because of a law against strikes by government employees.

Complicating matters, President Richard Nixon proposed in May 1969 to replace the cabinet-level Post Office with a self-supporting postal corporation. NALC and other postal unions objected because the plan would have kept the ban on strikes while stripping away Civil Service benefits and job protections.

In June, NALC President James Rademacher announced a court challenge to the federal no-strike ban. A week later, he testified before Congress warning of a strike over the low postal pay.

That wasn't enough for many members. Within New York Branch 36, a "rank-and-file movement" had formed around 23-year carrier Vincent Sombrotto, who later became NALC president. They pressed the union for meaningful action.

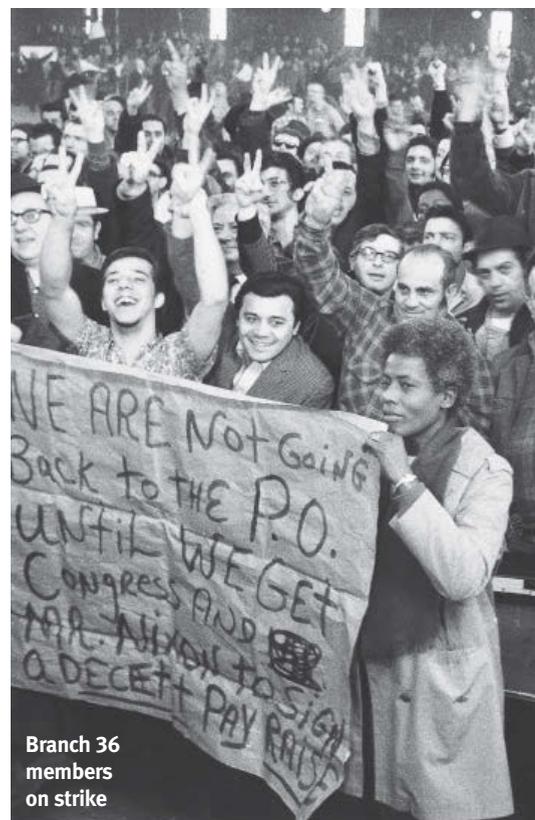
On March 12, 1970, Branch 36 President Gus Johnson was interrupted at a branch meeting as he described a compromise reform bill, worked out secretly between Presidents Nixon and Rademacher. Shouts broke out: "No, no! Not enough! Strike! Enough talk! Strike!"

A tumultuous debate ended with agreement to hold a strike vote on March 17. When the tally was announced at 11 p.m., the branch had voted 1,555 yes, 1,055 no—an almost 3-to-2 margin in favor of a strike.

At the stroke of midnight, members of Branch 36 began setting up picket lines around post offices throughout Manhattan and the Bronx. Within hours, other branches joined in and the wildcat strike eventually spread to other cities across the land.

The end result of the strike was that Congress passed the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970, creating the U.S. Postal Service. It gave postal unions the power to bargain for wages and benefits, and the ability to arbitrate contract disputes and enforce members' rights.

Too often, we assume things have always been the way they are, but the foundation for today's postal workplace was laid by the strikers of 1970. As we have for each of the last 44 years, we remember—and thank—the brave men and women who made the present and



Branch 36 members on strike

future better for all of us when they put their jobs and freedom at risk by going on strike.

Note: There is much more to this story, told in the NALC history book, *Carriers in a Common Cause*, and in the video, "The Strike at 40." *Carriers in a Common Cause* is available from the NALC Supply Department at NALC Headquarters, while "The Strike at 40" can be viewed online at nalc.org/nalc/facthist/top10.html.

Additional personal remembrances of the strike and of Sombrotto are being prepared for a video to be shown at the NALC national convention in Philadelphia this summer. **PR**