1971-1978

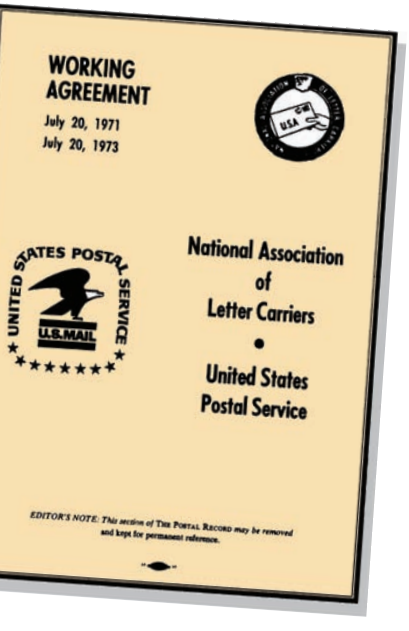
IN THE AFTERMATH OF VICTORY

Both the strike of 1970 and the passage of the Postal Reorganization Act which soon followed jolted the course of NALC history. For whether letter carriers joined picket lines or stayed on the job, their working lives and their union lives would never be the same.

Carriers now worked for a new employer. The old Post Office Department had been put to rest, replaced by the U.S. Postal Service. But more had changed than simply a name or the patch carriers wore on their sleeves. Congress told the new employer to be "business-like"— to take whatever steps might be necessary to "break even" on the accounting ledger. For carriers this meant speed-ups, harassment, over-supervision and, most important, a renewed dependence upon the union to combat management's more aggressive style.

The NALC, too, would never be the same, for the strike released forces that would revolutionize the union from within. Local strike leaders did not quickly forget their successful challenge to the NALC national leadership as well as to the courts and the federal government. Nor did it escape their notice that while they had been victorious on the picket lines, they were still relatively powerless within the union.

NALC President James Rademacher signs the first collective bargaining agreement with the Postal Service in July 1971. Also shown (from left) are: Postmaster General Winton M. Blount and Federal Mediator William Usery.



The wildcat strike had been led by rank-and-file members of Branch 36 in New York. It was in New York that the movement to change the NALC—to reshape it into a modern union capable of dealing as an equal with modern management—was launched. New York carriers without influence in branch affairs organized their own party with the slogan, "Get the leaders to change or change the leaders." They criticized both the branch and national incumbent officers for failing to give leadership to the strike, for lack of success in dealing with postal management and—what was at the heart of the matter—for retaining internal union procedures and practices which prevented average letter carriers from becoming a political force within their own union.

In October 1970, candidates supported by a newly formed rank-and-file movement in New York City were elected in 22 out of 24 contests for station delegates, as NALC stewards were then called. Shortly thereafter, the rank-and-filers challenged the incumbent branch president and other branch officers in what was the first contest for branch leadership in over 20 years. On December 2, 1970, the membership of Branch 36 swept Vincent R. Sombrotto and the remainder of the 20-man rank-and-file ticket into office. And, as was true of the strike earlier in 1970, events in New York anticipated those throughout the country: during the next four months rank-and-file slates won victories in Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Boston and other cities.

This political upheaval at the local level in early 1971 was taking place at the same time the NALC and the other postal unions were entering into the unions' first national contract negotiations with the new U.S. Postal Service. Letter carriers hoped their newly won collective bargaining rights would lead to substantial improvements in wages and working conditions. In New York, where the militance that had ignited the 1970 strike had not yet died, these feelings were transformed into action on June 30, 1971. On that day, 12,000 postal workers in the city rallied in support of "a no contract—no work" position which was aimed as much at the national leadership of the NALC and other postal unions as it was at management itself.

The collective bargaining agreement that the NALC signed with the Postal Service on July 20, 1971 fell short of the expectations of many carriers in New York and elsewhere. Nevertheless, it was in many respects a major accomplishment, because not only did the contract provide for wage increases and a cost-of-living adjustment—the first ever for postal employees—it also contained a "no lay-off" clause which prohibited the Postal Service from laying off carriers and other bargain-

ing-unit employees "on an involuntary basis." Still, some carriers criticized the agreement's failure to improve fringe benefits and to preserve strict craft lines between carrier and clerk duties. In addition, the wide disciplinary powers granted management were soundly attacked.

One New York rank-and-file leader, believing that the contract had given unbridled authority to the new budget-conscious postal management, articulated what many dissenting carriers felt: that the new contract would lead to "increased supervision and harassment of letter carriers; arbitrary discipline; increased productivity with no benefits; reductions in personnel; elimination of carrier assignments; accelerated changes and additions to letter carriers' routes; deteriorating service which would bring unfair criticism from the patrons to the letter carrier; and an overall and large-scale problem of low morale."

While prospects of a more authoritarian, more heavy-handed postal management clearly concerned many of the letter carriers associated with the local rank-and-file movements springing up throughout the country, these carriers were equally troubled by what they perceived to be an authoritarian, heavy-handed NALC national leadership. During the 1971 negotiations, the national union had placed

BRANCH MERGERS


ORGANIZED 1889 INCORPORATED 1891

National Association of Letter Carriers

AFFILIATED WITH AFL-CIO

To Whom These Presents Come, Greeting:

Be it Known, That the Association above named hath, on the day written herein, granted this Charter to Branch No. 1100 and its successors, and that by virtue hereof said Branch is possessed of and entitled to all the rights and privileges accorded to Branch Associations under the Constitution and Laws of said National Association of Letter Carriers.

Provided, That said Branch be known as Branch No. 1100 of the National Association of Letter Carriers of the United States of America, and shall be located at Gardena Grove in the State of California. And provided further that said Branch shall obey and conform to the Constitution, Laws, Usages and Customs of said National Association, as the same shall from time to time prevail; otherwise this Charter to be null and void, and of no effect whatsoever.

In the event of the revocation of this Charter for default in any of the provisions herein contained, then same, together with the books, papers, moneys, and all other property of said Branch, shall become the property of said National Association. The acceptance of this by said Branch makes the members thereof, individually and collectively, one of the parties to the agreement herein stated.

Witness, the hands of the President and Secretary-Treasurer and the seal of the National Association of Letter Carriers of the United States of America, affixed at Washington, D.C. this twenty-third day of August A. D. One Thousand Nine Hundred and seventy-three.

President Secretary-Treasurer

While to a great extent NALC was first organized in large cities—Detroit, Milwaukee, Buffalo, for example—by the early 20th century more and more of the union's branches were exceedingly small. Increasingly, branches represented a single work station, with only a handful of carriers. This provided a sense of intimacy and loyalty, but it also resulted in an enormous number of branches. By 1970, NALC consisted of over 6,600 branches, many of them with only one or two members. Only those in the nation's largest cities could support full-time officers.

With the passage of the Postal Reorganization Act, the union intentionally set out to modernize its structure. Recognizing that the challenges of collective bargaining would require a pooling of numbers and resources, delegates to the 1970 National Convention in Hawaii approved an amendment allowing branches to merge with one another.

This provision was rapidly implemented throughout the country. In 1973, 103 branches on Long Island came together to form Long Island Merged Branch 6000 with a combined membership of over 3,000. Across the continent, 26 southern California branches totaling 2,000 members joined forces as Merged Branch 1100. By the end of that year, there were 23 mergers in New Jersey, 13 in Texas, and 12 in Ohio. Merger fever has continued ever since as more and more branches recognized that mergers can improve representation by making part- and full-time officers more feasible and by giving branches a greater opportunity to send members to state and national conventions and training sessions.

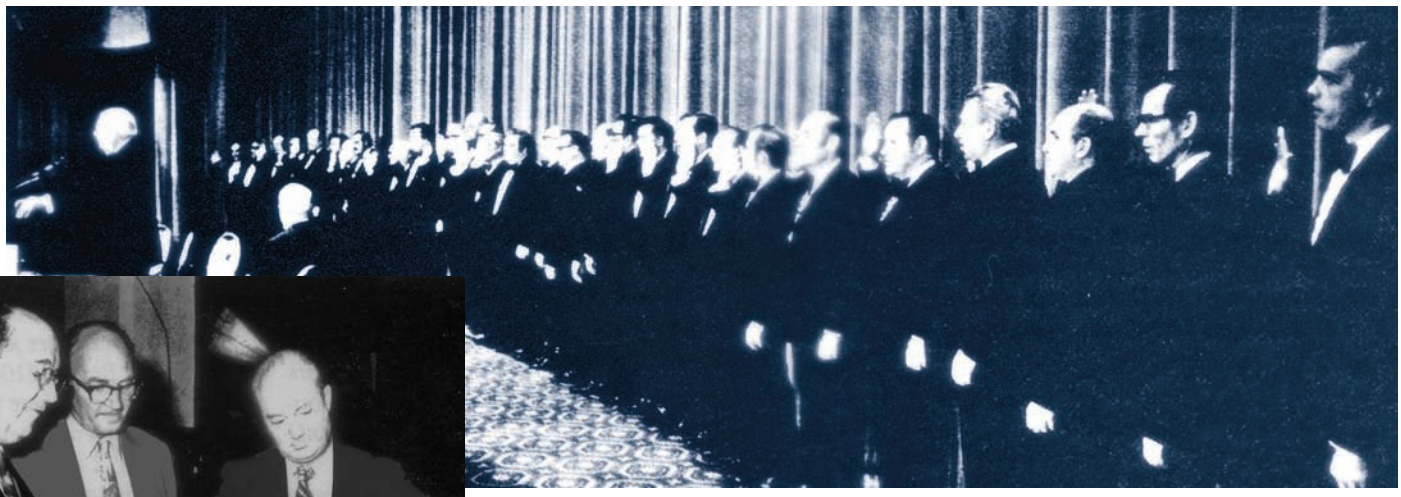
All in all, since the 1970 Hawaii convention, the union has gained thousands of members, while reducing the number of branches dramatically. By mid-2014, NALC's 270,000 members belonged to approximately 2,052 branches, with almost 85 percent of the members in the largest 337 branches—those with at least 150 members. This suggests that the union continues to consist of a small number of medium to large-size "full service" branches and a large number of very small branches that do not have a local dues structure and thus lack the resources to represent their members on the workroom floor and to take an active part in the NALC legislative and political program as well attend state and national events.

Branch 36—then in the early days of Vincent R. Sombrotto's new rank-and-file administration—under trusteeship. Although cut off from the union dues which would normally have flowed from national headquarters in Washington, Sombrotto and his team maintained control of the union's affairs for almost the entire six months of the trusteeship. This defiant show of self-reliance strengthened the resolve of other rank-and-filers throughout the country who were already convinced that the national leadership was either uninterested in or perhaps even afraid of the mass participation of letter carriers in union affairs.

At a conference of concerned letter carriers in Minneapolis on October 13, 1971, local rank-and-filers formed themselves into the National Rank-and-File Movement with a permanent coordinating committee. The conference also set out three basic tenets.

First, all national officers should be elected directly by the membership. These "one-man, one-vote" referendum elections would replace the existing proxy system which allowed delegates to national conventions to cast ballots on behalf of the absent membership—even on behalf of members of branches not in attendance at a convention. Second, the union's regionally based national field directors—precursors to the national business agents—should be elected only by members from the directors' own regions. Under such a provision, a letter carrier in California could no longer vote for the regional representative of a Massachusetts carrier. Finally, all nationally negotiated collective bargaining agreements would have to be submitted to the membership for ratification.

The rank-and-file movement achieved all three of these goals during the next three years. Delegates at the 1972 national convention in New Orleans adopted the "one-man, one-vote" amendment when NALC President James Rademacher, recognizing which way the winds of changes were blowing, acceded to the wishes of the membership and reluctantly



Top: President Emeritus William C. Doherty installs NALC national officers in January 1975 in Washington, DC following the first "one-man, one-vote" referendum election in the union's history.

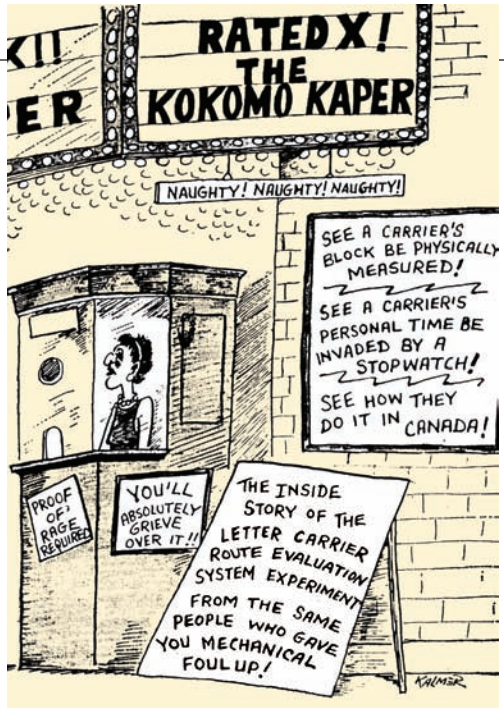
Left: NALC President James Rademacher (right) checks the 1973 tentative "Working Agreements" as they are placed in the mail to be sent to the membership for ratification.

endorsed the amendment. However, the other two democratizing measures—one providing for regionally elected representatives in each of the 15 NALC regions and the other demanding membership ratification of collective bargaining agreements—were both defeated in New Orleans. But these proved to be only temporary setbacks for the rank-and-filers.

In 1973, after the national leadership had negotiated a tentative collective bargaining agreement with the Postal Service, the NALC Executive Council sent the agreement out to the membership for ratification—which was accomplished by a vote of more than 2-to-1—even though there was no constitutional mandate. After this, incorporating membership ratification into the NALC Constitution was a formality which was accomplished in 1974 at the Seattle convention. There, the delegates also approved the regional election of the regionally based representatives—by then known as national business agents or NBAs.

In retrospect, these victories were major milestones on the road to transforming the NALC into a modern union but not the culmination of the process. In fact, it was not until 1978 that the members would take full advantage of the democratic procedures adopted at the 1972 and 1974 conventions.

Nevertheless, these earlier convention battles sent a message to postal management that in the future it would have to deal with the will of the entire NALC membership—a force the union's top leadership could not always control as the 1970 strike had demonstrated. This message could not have been more timely, for the Postal Service was intent on making letter carriers pay for their union's successes in winning wage rates comparable to those enjoyed by workers in the private sector.

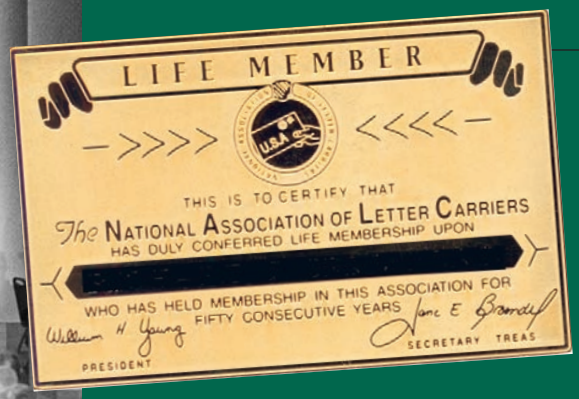


'KOKOMO IS DEAD!'

Almost from the beginning of the new, cost-cutting Postal Service, postal management had been determined to raise productivity. Managers soon put carriers under unprecedented pressure to deliver their routes at break-neck speed. Unresolved grievances piled up in response to this new speed-up. In fact, anger at the increased workplace pressure was at the heart of the opposition to the 1973 National Agreement—which was rejected by 31 percent of those voting in the first membership ratification of a contract.

In April 1974, postal management announced it would begin a pilot work measurement system—LCRES—which would make the scientific management experiments of Taylor and others prior to World War I seem benign by comparison.

The main test was yet to come. In April 1974, postal management announced it would begin a pilot work measurement system called LCRES—Letter Carrier Route Evaluation System—which would make the scientific management experiments of Frederick Winslow Taylor and others prior to World War I seem benign by comparison. To be tested first at South Kokomo station in Kokomo, Indiana, the "Kokomo Plan"



RETIRED MEMBERS

From the earliest days of the NALC, many retired carriers have retained their membership in the union, thus passing along to future generations the history and traditions of both the craft and the union while also adding to the union's collective strength especially in the political and legislative arenas.

Like active carriers, retired letter carriers have long recognized that only through the union have they been able to successfully fight for and defend their benefits. But active members have also benefitted enormously from the contributions retirees have made to the union. For the more than half-century that the 1939 Hatch Act limited the political rights of working carriers and other postal and federal workers, retirees played an essential role in furthering the union's legislative objectives–a role they have continued even after the 1993 reform of the Hatch Act substantially relaxed restrictions on working carriers' political activities.

The contributions of NALC's retirees have long been acknowledged by the union, and at the union's golden anniversary convention in Milwaukee in 1939, delegates established the practice of presenting Gold Cards to carriers with 50 years of membership. At subsequent conventions, additional honors were created for carriers retiring with between 55 and 75 years of membership. Moreover, to encourage carriers to maintain their NALC membership in retirement, delegates to the 1956 national convention created a lower national dues structure for retirees.

But despite the historically high regard the union had shown for its retirees, the advent of collective bargaining following the 1970 strike led some retired members to fear that the union might ignore their interests. After all, since the Postal Service was not legally required to bargain over retiree benefits and, as a consequence, the union's time and resources would be devoted to negotiating the wages and working conditions of its active members, who would speak for retired letter carriers?

This line of thought led retired members to demand their own voice in union affairs through an elected national officer concerned solely with the needs of retired members. The position of Director of Retired Members limited to retired members was overwhelmingly approved at the 1976 Houston convention. Three primary duties were assigned to the newly created position: to provide information and service to retired members and those members nearing retirement; to monitor legislative issues of particular concern to retired carriers; and—as a national officer not covered by the Hatch Act—to administer COLCPE, the union's political action fund.

In the decades since the position was created, the Director of Retired Members' responsibilities and constituency have grown substantially. Today the Director heads a Retirement Department serving more than 89,000 retired members, including more than 13,000 Gold Card members and more than 8,500 women, a number that will continue to grow due to the influx of women into the carrier workforce in the previous half-century. The Department maintains a toll-free number to provide retirees and survivors access to both general and individually based retirement information, much of it obtained through regular contacts with the U.S. Office of Personnel Management and other federal agencies. It also monitors retiree-related legislative proposals and plays a leading role in the expansion and operation of COLCPE. Retirees are kept up to date through the Department's page on the NALC website, the Director's *Postal Record* column, and informational pamphlets. Nonetheless, a substantial number of NALC members, when retiring from the Postal Service and no longer requiring protection on the workroom floor, do not continue their union membership, failing to understand the union's role in preserving their benefits as retirees.

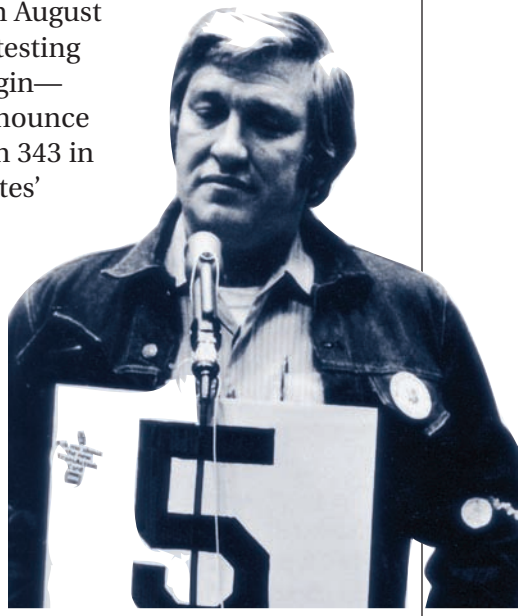
(as LCRES soon came to be known) was to be introduced in every station in the country—if judged a success by management.

The "Kokomo Plan" involved establishing work and time standards for each letter carrier function. These would be put into a computer which would then determine an eight-hour route for each individual carrier. Two letter carriers from Branch 36 who visited Kokomo after the Service began testing the system in November 1974 described what they saw:

> *The efficiency experts measured and timed how far a carrier walks to and from the time clock, and how he walks in pulling his case. The distance the carrier's arm moves in casing a letter was noted. They even measured to the split second the time it took for the carrier to move his eyes from the letter to the case and the time it took for the carrier to move his eyes from the case back to the next letter. At this rate, if you sneezed, you could be charged with delay in the mail.*

To letter carriers, the announcement of the "Kokomo Plan" was virtually a declaration of war. At the NALC's national convention in Seattle in August 1974—three months before the testing at Kokomo was scheduled to begin—speaker after speaker rose to denounce the plan. A delegate from Branch 343 in St. Louis summed up the delegates' anger and fear: "Brothers, if this system is allowed to be implemented, letter carriers are going to be reduced to nothing but automation, and letter carriers aren't robots, they are human beings." In the end, the delegates—well aware that a postal strike would be illegal—voted to authorize NALC President Rademacher to call a nationwide strike if the Postal Service implemented LCRES and "if it is not to the liking of the letter carriers."

The Service's testing of LCRES soon began, first in Kokomo in November 1974, and then in Rose City Park station in Portland, Oregon in February 1975. The situation at Rose City Park was



Branch 36 President Vincent R. Sombrotto at the microphone at the Seattle Convention in 1974. Below, a teller counts delegates standing for a vote.

A Branch 82 carrier continues delivering his route in Portland, Oregon in 1975, ignoring the Postal Service's time-and-motion expert who is recording the carrier's every action as part of the Service's testing of the infamous "Kokomo Plan."

especially appalling. After 38 letter carriers had been tested for eight months, nine carriers had transferred, three had retired, two were disabled and one had died. In all, close to half of the original work force was gone in less than a year—a situation which prompted one Portland carrier to write: "For 1976 we hope and pray that our national officers will be successful in receiving a ruling by the arbitrator to have the Kokomo plan disallowed, so that carriers will again be treated as humans instead of robots and we will have a return to better service."

The Portland carrier's prayers were eventually answered. NALC had demanded arbitration of the LCRES dispute on September 9, 1975—one day after the Postal Service had announced that it was converting LCRES from a test to a permanent program at Rose City Park station. A Memorandum of Understanding which the postal unions had negotiated with the Postal Service during 1975 bargaining clearly permitted the union to delay any attempt by postal management to implement as a permanent program new national work and time standards until an arbitrator had determined that the standards themselves were "fair, reasonable and equitable." And NALC President James Rademacher clearly believed that LCRES was far from "fair, reasonable and equitable." Rademacher also reasoned that if by some cosmic miscarriage of justice, the arbitrator did rule against the union, then the NALC could still call a strike to prevent the Postal Service from implementing the system.

The arbitration hearings began in November 1976. NALC counsel argued that by adopting predetermined time standards for each work function, the Postal Service had unilaterally increased the work load of letter carriers, thereby violating the National Agreement. Moreover, the system itself placed carriers under unbearable physical burdens. The arbitrator issued an interim decision on July 8, 1976, prohibiting management at the Rose City Park Station in Portland from forcing carriers to work overtime. One month later, on the eve of the NALC's national convention in Houston, the full award was announced: LCRES was in violation of the National Agreement. The NALC position was upheld, and convention

delegates roared their approval as President James Rademacher announced, "Kokomo is dead."

REBUILDING THE LEGISLATIVE MACHINERY

The union's attention to workplace issues—a natural outgrowth of both the advent of collective bargaining and the more aggressive stance of the new, "business-oriented" Postal Service—for a time masked the fact that many issues affecting letter carriers were still being determined in the halls of Congress. But in the somewhat heady and certainly contentious days immediately following the Postal Reorganization Act, this was not readily apparent to many union leaders. The leadership no longer systematically lobbied the Congress, once the only means of improving letter carriers' wages and working conditions, believing that decent and secure working conditions could be won through collective bargaining alone. No longer, as in the years before the Postal Reorganization Act, did NALC even attempt to mass letter carriers together in giant pay rallies or grind out thousands of pieces of mail to members of Congress. In fact, by the mid-1970s, the powerful Doherty and Keating legislative machinery had all but withered away.

By this time, however, the national leadership began to realize that legislative issues were still of vital importance to the union. Having negotiated two collective bargaining agreements with the Postal Service, they were now more aware than ever before that the lack of the legal right to strike was a severe restraint on their ability to negotiate a contract that would be satisfactory to a still restive membership. Bills legalizing the right of postal employees to strike and granting the postal unions some form of union security—which at the minimum would require that even non-members pay the unions for the

NALC President Rademacher (back to camera, c.) testifies on the Postal Subsidy Bill in 1975.

NALC President J. Joseph Vacca (third from left) and other postal union negotiators face management as bargaining for the 1978 National Agreement begins.

representation they were receiving—had languished in the Congress as the NALC turned its back on the legislative process. Furthermore, certain letter carrier benefits and protections, such as the workers' compensation program, Federal Employees' Health Benefits Program, and the Civil Service Retirement System, were federal law and thus subject to congressional attack. Union leaders also began to realize that the collective bargaining rights postal employees enjoyed were themselves a product of congressional action—and what Congress could give, Congress could certainly take away.

Once union leaders recognized that Congress would continue to be instrumental in the fight for better pay, working conditions and benefits, they took the first steps in what would prove to be a lengthy process—the rebuilding of the NALC legislative machinery. In March 1975, NALC launched a Legislative Liaison Network designed to build an extensive network of members who would write their congressional representatives. The NALC Executive Council took an additional step on July 21, 1975, when it formally christened the small political action fund the union had established the previous year as the Committee on Letter Carrier Political Education—COLCPE—with the aim of "determining and implementing programs to collect voluntary funds" and the responsibility of dispersing these "contributions to, or expenditures on behalf of, candidates for federal elective office."

In retrospect, it is clear that these steps were just the beginning, for the results were, at first, meager. Relying exclusively on appeals at various union meetings and regular exhortations in union publications, union leaders were unable to convince the membership of the importance of contributing to the union's political action fund. In the 12 months ending March 31, 1978, COLCPE raised only about $70,000. The Legislative Liaison Network itself was more of a paper expression of what should be done than a smoothly functioning grassroots operation. Appeals to write Congress were issued—and responded to—from time to time by a constantly changing cadre of legislative liaisons, but during this period, NALC's grassroots efforts never reached beyond a relatively small number of activists. Most members of the union—and even many local leaders—remained indifferent to legislation.

The 2013 NALC Heroes of the Year

HERO OF THE YEAR AWARDS

Walking their routes daily on virtually every street in the nation, letter carriers have often been the first to arrive at the scene of an accident, disaster or crime—and the first to offer assistance. They have also frequently been the first to notice and respond to a community problem: families without food, senior citizens alone at holiday time, substance abuse among neighborhood youth.

NALC established the Hero of the Year awards in 1974 to pay annual tribute to letter carriers who risk their lives to save the lives of others. A new award—the Humanitarian of the Year—was initiated in 1978 to honor carriers who make sustained personal contributions to the betterment of their communities. In 1986, the union announced the establishment of a Branch Service Award to recognize an NALC branch involved in an on-going community service program. A fourth category—special Carrier Alert Rescue—was created in 2002 to honor letter carriers who, due to their alert observations of conditions and people on their routes, save customers' lives.

Judges representing the labor community, community service organizations, and emergency public services review items published in *The Postal Record's* "Proud to Serve" column and select the annual winners.

To focus public attention on not only the award winners but also the thousands of other letter carriers who deliver more than the mail, the NALC began in 1985 to honor the Heroes of the Year with an annual reception in Washington, DC. NALC officers, members of Congress, the postmaster general and other USPS officials, and AFL-CIO leaders have joined the heroes, their families and their branch presidents at the official ceremony.

Every effort is made to publicize the Hero of the Year reception as well as the individual stories of the award winners. The event itself is taped for transmissions to TV stations in the heroes' home cities, and local, regional and national print and broadcast media outlets are informed. Voice and video interviews are also distributed to radio and televison outlets.

Above, a member tends to a woman he helped evacuate from a house fire in 1993.
Rick Sforza, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin

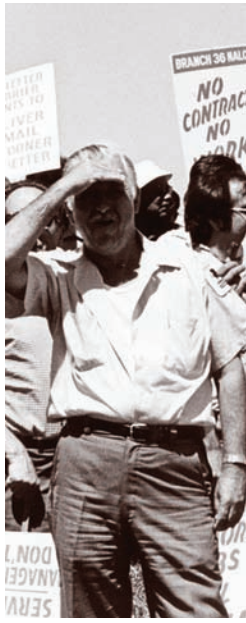
This combination of indifference and concern was generally unproductive. The union was able to protect the Private Express Statutes guaranteeing the Postal Service's monopoly over letter mail and to stall efforts to bring all postal and federal employees under the Social Security system—but these congressional attacks on carrier benefits were rare and mounted with little enthusiasm by their supporters. On the other hand, the union lost the one percent addition to retirees' cost-of-living adjustments and was unable to enact legislation which would keep the public service subsidy, restrict the right of postal management to curtail service, improve the retirement program, or amend the Hatch Act. These defeats underscored the union's inability to mobilize a politically sophisticated army of grassroots volunteers.

But the national leaders' lack of success in rallying the membership to support the union's legislative agenda was not surprising. The internal political turbulence unleashed by the strike of 1970 had not yet abated. Only when the reins of power had passed to a new group of union leaders would the NALC be able to fashion an effective legislative program.

TRIUMPH OF THE RANK-AND-FILERS

By 1976, the forces of change let loose by the strike of 1970 had changed the NALC markedly. The union had substantially strengthened itself by adopting internal constitutional reforms. In its dealings with the Postal Service, the union was developing new skills in grievance handling and contract administration. And the union was at least beginning to recognize the importance of establishing a program to deal with the major legislative issues of the day. These developments, as significant as they were in the evolution of the union, were not enough to heal the wounds the strike had opened.

Tired of the continual turmoil, President James Rademacher announced that he would not seek re-election in 1976. Controversial during his term of office, Rademacher nevertheless led the NALC through the transition from an "association" with few rights in the workplace to a labor union empowered to bargain collectively with its employer. He skillfully negotiated three collective bargaining agreements with the Postal Service, thus setting the standards upon which his successors could build in the years ahead. Moreover, Rademacher left a legacy of fairness and integrity, for he oversaw the implementation of the democratic reforms which the membership had demanded.



Recognizing that the forces for change were, in the long run, irresistible, he graciously accepted what he could not prevent and thereby eased the NALC's transition into a new era. Upon his retirement, even those who had long opposed him paid him tribute, for none could deny James Rademacher's commitment to the working letter carrier.

Rademacher was succeeded by the incumbent Executive Vice President J. Joseph Vacca, who, in the fall of 1976, defeated Branch 36 President Vincent

R. Sombrotto in a hotly contested election. Vacca's narrow margin of victory foreshadowed the difficulties he would face as growing membership criticism of the union's inability to redress workplace conditions adequately had now passed to his shoulders. For example, members and branch officers were outraged by a report that of the 3,022 grievances submitted to arbitration from mid-1975 through mid-1977, the NALC had lost 87 percent. To many, this was a sign of a lack of leadership on the part of the new administration. Adding to the dissatisfaction of the rank and file was a grievance backlog—itself a result of continued management harassment and workplace pressure—which was causing substantial delay in resolving workplace disputes. At the same time, the union was experiencing a financial crisis which was, at least in part, a result of the decline in the number of letter carriers employed by the Postal Service.

The union's internal difficulties were the backdrop against which Vacca faced his first major crisis—the national negotiations between the postal unions and the Postal Service in 1978. Under pressure to gain substantial improvements in wages and working conditions, Vacca faced a postal management which came to the bargaining table with a number of "take-away" demands including the elimination of the no-layoff clause that had first been negotiated in 1971. In the agreement reached during the early hours of July 21, 1978, union negotiators settled for three annual wage increases of two, three and five percent each plus a cost-of-living provision which "capped" the payment of the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) at the amounts payable during the previous contract—regardless of how high inflation might actually rise. Despite a number of significant changes in the provisions of the contract pertaining to working conditions—the guarantee of two 10-minute breaks and additional protections in route examination procedures, for example—the members were dissatisfied by both the pay package and the capped COLA and, for the first time, used the

Branch 36 members picket in July 1978 in Washington, DC as part of a rally in support of NALC's negotiating team.

ratification procedure to reject an NALC-negotiated contract.

The union resumed negotiations with the Postal Service, but the talks quickly deadlocked. The parties then agreed to bring two issues—the pay package and the no-layoff clause—to a hybrid dispute resolution process called "mediation-arbitration" which held out the possibility that the parties might still reach a negotiated settlement. Harvard University Professor James J. Healy functioned in this dual capacity of mediator-arbitrator and on September 15, 1978—after less than two weeks of "mediation" failed to achieve a settlement among the parties—Healy assumed the role of impartial arbitrator. In deciding the two issues, he clearly took a middle of the road position. Healy removed the cap on the COLA, increased the annual wage increases slightly, and relaxed the no-layoff clause to allow the Postal Service to terminate employees with less than six years of service (although also providing lifetime job security for those carriers and other postal employees who were working for the Postal Service when the decision was issued).

While the arbitration award could be viewed as an improvement over what the parties had originally negotiated, the entire collective bargaining process left considerable political wreckage in its wake. The rejection of what the membership obviously considered an unacceptable agreement, the arbitration of only two issues rather than the entire contract, and, finally, the fact that an outsider had determined the wages and the extent of letter carriers' job security—all this increased the membership's concern about the effectiveness of the existing leadership. In the national election held during and after the "mediation-arbitration" process, Vincent R. Sombrotto, still the president of Branch 36 in New York, defeated Vacca by a vote of 75,137 to 43,407. The wide margin of victory helped propel into office most of the candidates running on the Sombrotto slate, many of whom defeated incumbent officers.

Sombrotto's victory, the culmination of a process which had begun at least as early as the 1970 strike, was the final triumph for the rank-and-file forces. Forged by the fires of militancy the strike had ignited, these men and women fought throughout the 1970s for the reforms and the issues which made the new president's election possible. Without the "one-man, one-vote" national elections, the membership ratification of collective bargaining agreements, and the emphasis upon management harassment and speed-ups, Sombrotto and his supporters would not have catapulted to national office in 1978.

In another sense, however, the triumph of the rank-and-filers was simply the latest stage in the union's continuous struggle to improve the rights of letter carriers. Sombrotto, himself a student of NALC history, was aware of the union's long heritage. But the new leadership also recognized that it would be judged by its ability to shape the future. Unified within, with a continued commitment to the rights of letter carriers, the NALC prepared to face the future with confidence.