

1979-1989

ON THE CUTTING EDGE OF CHANGE



Installed in January 1979 as NALC's sixteenth president, Vincent R. Sombrotto took the helm of a union deeply affected—some would say weakened—by the previous decade's turbulence. With the union deeply in debt, Sombrotto immediately called upon the membership to put the union back on a sound financial footing. Members responded by approving overwhelmingly a monthly assessment on top of the regular dues. For its part, the new administration slashed expenses, cutting back severely in virtually every area. This combination of additional revenues and reduced expenditures turned the union's balance sheets around, and by spring of 1980, the union was in the black.

The union also suffered from internal divisions. The recent election had swept from office a number of longtime national officers, and their supporters were, at the very least, dubious that the new president could administer the union as effectively as he had criticized those who had previously held national office. Adding to the potential for continued divisiveness was the fact that the new administration included officers who had supported first James H. Rademacher and then J. Joseph Vacca during the 1970s. At the same time, a contentious lawsuit arising from the Postal Service's failure to observe the overtime pay requirements of the Fair Labor Standards Act—New Deal legislation regulating private sector employment practices extended to postal employees in 1974—was pitting one group of members against another.

The new administration's goal in the FLSA case was to find a solution that would treat all carriers equally, not an easy task since only a portion of the membership, those who had joined the private lawsuits previously settled, had received a financial benefit from the case. In February 1979, NALC found a legal mechanism which allowed its general counsel to intervene in the ongoing litigation to represent the interests of the thousands of letter carriers not part of the private lawsuits. After almost four years of legal maneuvering, a federal judge in October 1982 approved a comprehensive \$400 million settlement of the case. The settlement fulfilled the union's mission of achieving "equal treatment" for all carriers by securing payments based upon the same formula used earlier to settle the private lawsuits.

Internal divisions and financial woes were not the only hurdles facing Sombrotto upon assuming the presidency. The turmoil of the 1970s had prevented the union from developing the staff and administrative resources necessary to meet its responsibilities to the membership in the more complex workplace environment that the Postal Reorganization Act created. This disarray was

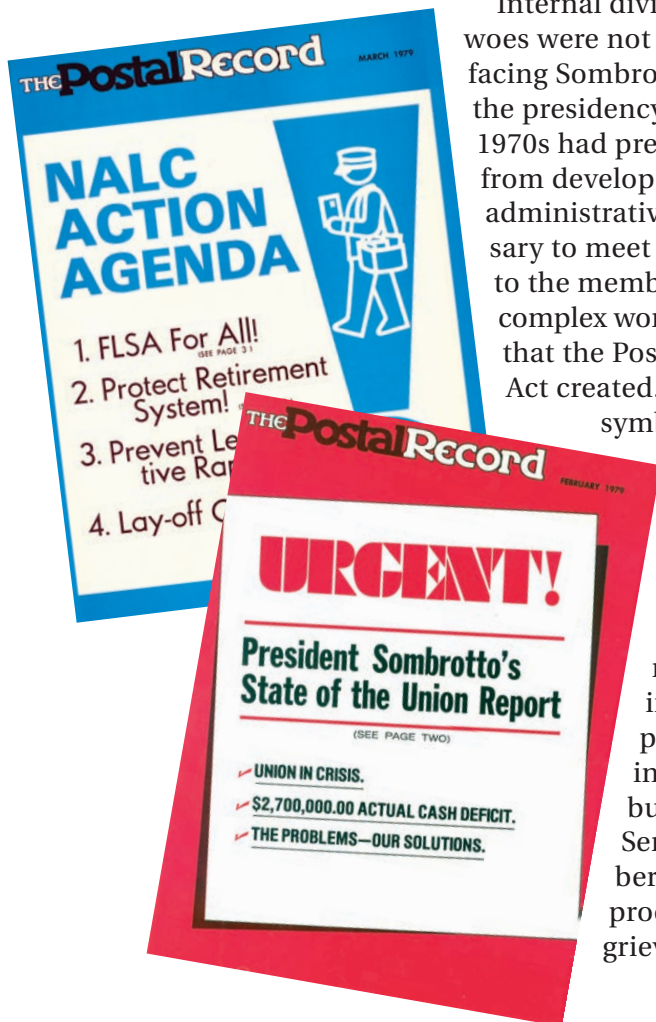
symbolized by a backlog of 6,000 unresolved national-level grievances resulting from deteriorating labor-management relations, the increased work pressures pervasive in the reorganized, businesslike Postal Service, and a cumbersome grievance procedure. In fact, the grievance procedure

was so cumbersome that during the 1978 contract negotiations it was replaced by a new system.

But the backlog survived the inauguration of that new procedure. To reduce it, the new administration instructed the union's national business agents to meet with their Postal Service counterparts to resolve as many as possible of the pending grievances, an effort that was only partially successful. In early 1980, the NALC and the Postal Service entered into "Operation Shakeout," a crash program in which specially appointed teams of union and management representatives reviewed the thousands of still-existing grievances to try to resolve as many as possible and withdraw those lacking any merit. Only those cases where the parties could not reach agreement were to be appealed to arbitration. By the summer of 1980, "Operation Shakeout," plus another intervention by the national business agents, had all but eliminated the national-level grievance backlog.

This grievance backlog was symptomatic of a larger problem confronting the NALC. The advent of collective bargaining, particularly the policing of a nationally negotiated contract with a multi-step grievance-arbitration procedure, had added heavily to the burden of the union. Since grievances alleging non-discipline violations of the contract could wend their way up to Washington, the national union was, to a large extent, functioning as an enormous local union.

Concentrating its energies on what were often local grievance problems prevented the national union from doing what only it was in a position to do—focus on the institutional Postal Service issues affecting all letter carriers. Most of these issues were being determined in Congress where NALC was no longer the force it had been in earlier times. The job confronting





Flanked by the massive legal record of the Fair Labor Standards Act litigation, still in process, NALC President Vincent R. Sombrotto explains to a 1980 press conference the union's goal of "equal treatment for all carriers." Also shown are Executive Vice President Tony R. Huerta and Vice President Frank Conners (far right).

Sombrotto and his fellow officers was to determine which tasks and responsibilities could best be handled by NALC's branches and regional offices. Then the national union could tackle not only bargaining table issues, but also those concerns of both active and retired carriers still determined by the Congress.

LEGISLATION TO THE FOREFRONT

In the mid-1970s, NALC leaders had recognized that although the union had acquired the right to bargain collectively for its membership, a strong and influential presence in the halls of Congress was still imperative. Attempts to rebuild the powerful grassroots lobbying organization that had functioned during the Doherty and Keating years began at that time. The union also formed its political action committee—the Committee on Letter Carrier Political Education, or COLCPE—to raise funds for contributions to friendly congressmen and senators. But these efforts had met with little enthusiasm from

the membership. By 1979, NALC's legislative program was still an idea whose time had not yet come.

This changed dramatically during the next few years. Recognizing that the effectiveness of NALC's Washington-based lobbying efforts depended heavily upon the union's "grassroots" legislative activity, the Sombrotto administration acted to make a grassroots network a reality. The network was built from the bottom up. Active legislative volunteers were recruited to work with an appointed legislative liaison in each congressional district. In turn, legislative liaisons reported to a state legislative chairman—almost always the state association president. This entire network was coordinated by the national union, which provided training and communicated the latest legislative developments to the field by mail and telephone. By the mid-1980s, the entire network numbered over 10,000 volunteers capable of rapid response to calls from the national union for assistance.

Building an effective grassroots lobbying network was only part of the task confronting the union. By the late





Thousands of NALC leaders enter a Washington, DC hotel ballroom to rally against “universal Social Security” in February 1983.



1970s, it was clear that influence in national politics required contributions to Congressional campaign funds. Since its creation in 1975, COLCPE, NALC’s political action committee, had been noticeably unsuccessful in raising the amounts of money necessary to do this. To raise more money, the union turned to direct mail. Buoyed by its experience in 1979 and 1980 when the union’s WAR (Win-A-Sure Retirement) campaign netted almost \$900,000 in 11 months to preserve the independence of the Civil Service Retirement System, the union expanded and refined its techniques for its first direct-mail COLCPE campaign. That campaign—“Budget Battle ’81”—raised over \$250,000. By the mid-1980s, COLCPE

was one of the most successful political action committees in the country, raising more than \$1 million nearly every year.

Ironically, the effectiveness of NALC’s legislative efforts was most evident in a campaign which was, in the end, unsuccessful. In late 1982 and early 1983, Congress put on the fast track a bipartisan legislative program to “reform” Social Security. Among other actions, postal and federal employees—protected since 1920 by the Civil Service Retirement System—would be brought under the Social Security umbrella. Concerned that this would leave working letter carriers without adequate retirement protection while eroding

the CSRS benefits of those carriers already retired, NALC pulled out all stops in an attempt to derail the “universal Social Security” train. President Sombrotto testified before numerous congressional committees, and the union regularly delivered comprehensive background information to congressional offices. Advertisements presenting the union’s case were purchased in newspapers throughout the country, and NALC members were asked by letter and telephone to urge their congressional representatives to vote against “universal Social Security.”

This activity culminated in late February 1983 in a giant legislative rally in Washington, DC. Nevertheless, a few weeks later, Congress passed and President Ronald Reagan signed the Social Security Reform Act which, although leaving existing letter carriers under CSRS, mandated Social Security coverage for postal and federal employees hired on or after January 1, 1984. Despite this result, the magnitude of the union’s efforts convinced many in Congress and elsewhere in government

that the NALC had become a true political and legislative force—a force which could not be ignored. This perception would serve the NALC well during the remainder of Reagan’s first term and throughout his second. Time after time, the union successfully repelled attempts to increase the cost of health benefits for both active and retired letter carriers; to reduce carriers’ retirement benefits; and, with one exception, to eliminate the cost-of-living adjustments retirees received.

LABOR- MANAGEMENT CONFLICT—AND COOPERATION

Vincent R. Sombrotto faced his first round of national collective bargaining in 1981 under pressure to negotiate a contract acceptable to a membership whose expectations he had helped to raise during the previous decade. He was

also confronted by a postal management emboldened by the anti-labor posturing of the Reagan administration. Management’s “get-tough” stance was revealed immediately. In mid-April, one week prior to the opening of the 1981 negotiations, the Postal Service, contending that the existing multiple craft structure made bargaining too “complicated,” asked the National Labor Relations Board to determine the “appropriate” bargaining unit or units before it would begin negotiating. Finally, in June, the full Board upheld an NLRB regional director’s earlier rejection of the Service’s move, and negotiations began—two months late and in an atmosphere poisoned by the Service’s machinations.

Against this backdrop, the NALC committed itself to retaining the “uncapped” cost-of-living adjustments—since the “capping” of COLA in the 1978 negotiations had been the major reason letter carriers had rejected that negotiated contract. Late in the 1981 process,



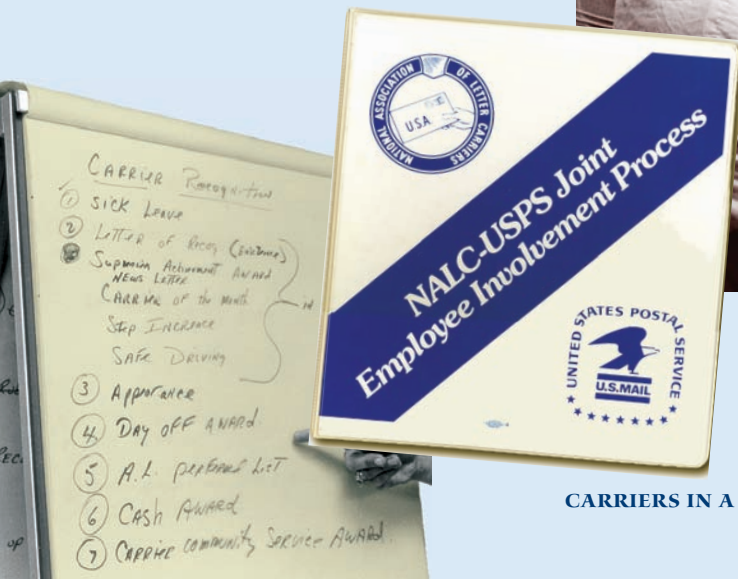
With the 1981 negotiations deadline only a few weeks away, letter carriers picketed post offices throughout the country in response to management’s stalling tactics.

management proposed freezing wages and capping COLA. In response, the NALC and its bargaining ally, the American Postal Workers Union, picketed post offices throughout the country and then augmented local action with a rally in Washington, DC. There the leaders of the unions made it clear that the membership should be prepared for any eventuality if a satisfactory agreement was not reached by the contract deadline. Finally, management relented. In the early hours of July 21, 1981, the unions and the Postal Service reached an agreement which retained the uncapped COLA, provided wage increases and eliminated mandatory route inspections, a long-sought goal of the union. Letter carriers throughout the country registered their overwhelming approval of the contract, ratifying the pact by a 6-to-1 margin.

Despite NALC's success at the bargaining table, relationships between the union and the management were in disarray at all levels of the system. The workplace pressures which had erupted in the 1970s continued as grievances

protesting harassment and violations of the contract by management mounted. Even outside observers were depicting labor-management relations within the Postal Service as unnecessarily adversarial and postal management as rigidly authoritarian.

Joint recognition by top postal management and NALC's national officers of the necessity to improve relations took concrete form in the spring of 1982 when the parties established a committee to devise a joint process to reach the workfloors of postal facilities throughout the country. Taking its cue in part from similar cooperative processes in the private sector, the committee—now called the NALC-USPS National Joint Employee Involvement Committee—agreed that its goal should be to improve the quality of the working lives of both carriers and their supervisors. It then created a structure revolving around facility-based, 8- to 10-member work teams of carriers and their supervisors which would meet regularly to discuss workplace problems and possible solutions. In September 1982, Sombrotto and

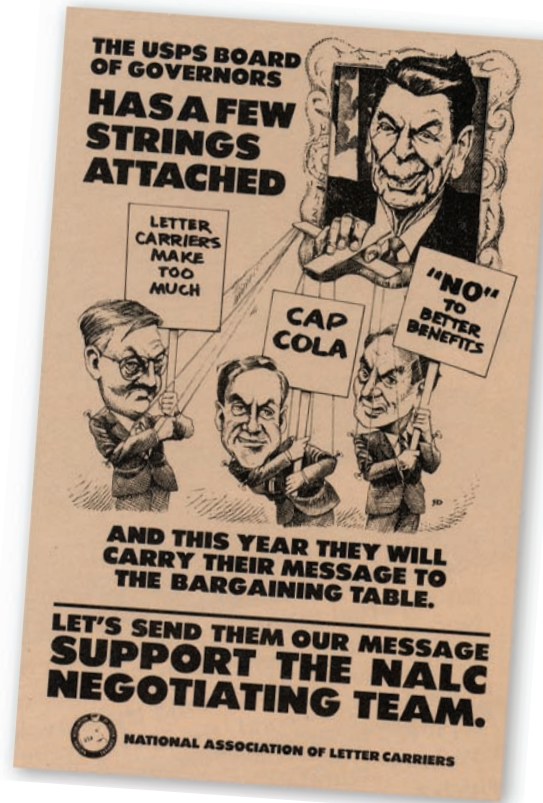


An Employee Involvement work team of carriers and their supervisors discusses work-related problems.

Postmaster General William F. Bolger signed a joint statement setting forth the goals of this new joint Employee Involvement—or EI—process. The first work teams and EI facilitators were trained in early 1983, and by the end of the year, work teams and local joint steering committees—NALC-USPS local oversight committees—were functioning in 17 localities. EI was clearly planted and growing. What impact it would make was still an open question.

It soon became clear that EI was neither a panacea for all the ills of the Postal Service nor had the emerging spirit of cooperation on the workroom floor affected the relationships between the NALC and the Postal Service at the highest levels. Even before the 1984 national negotiations began, the postal Board of Governors—the Service’s policy-making body of part-time political appointees—indicated that the Governors and not postal management would be calling the shots. These shots, the Reagan-appointed Board majority made clear, would be aimed at the pay of letter carriers and other craft employees. Once negotiations began, the Postal Service proposed freezing or reducing virtually every benefit and establishing a “two-tier” workforce. This new tier was to be composed of low-paid employees who would receive only a few benefits. When management refused to budge from its hard-line stance, successful negotiations were doomed. Shortly after midnight on July 21, 1984, negotiations broke down. For the first time since postal reorganization, a third-party arbitrator would decide the terms of an entire contract.

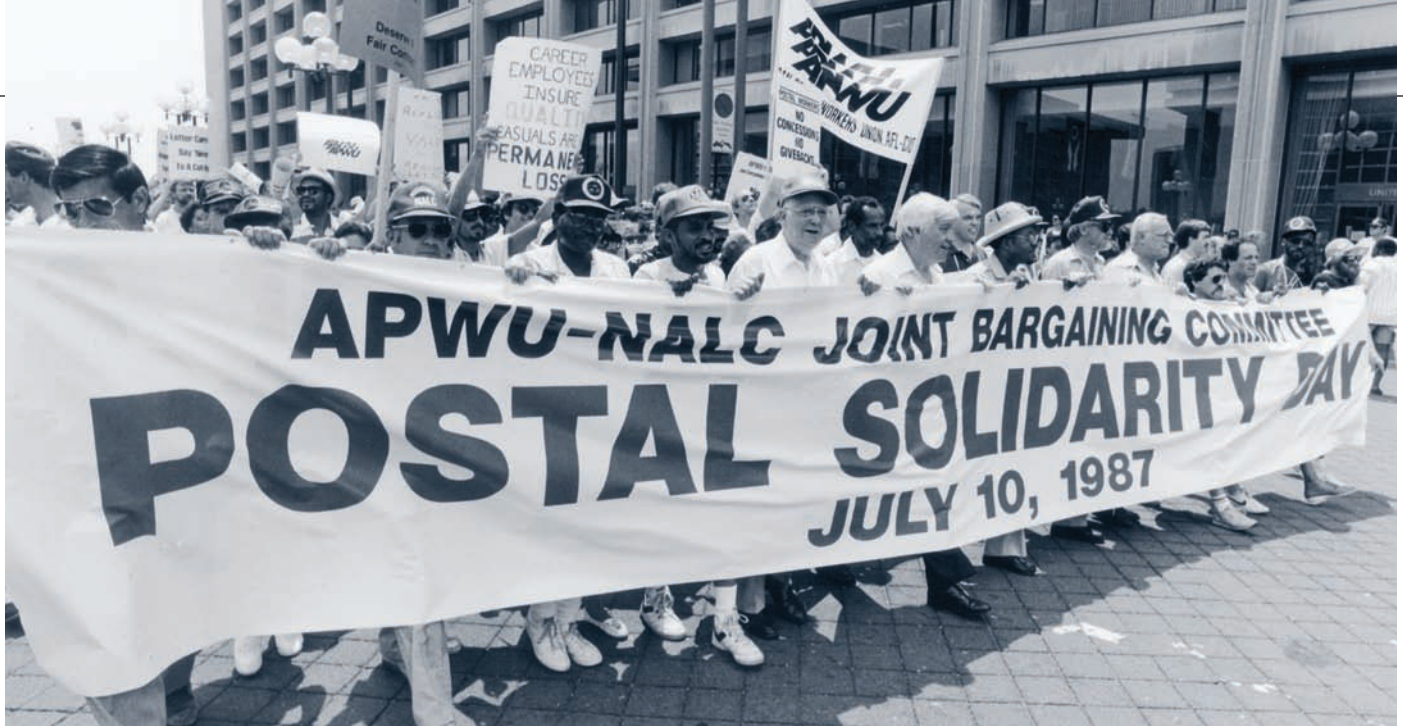
The arbitration hearing was held in Washington, DC in December 1984. Scores of witnesses were examined and cross-examined, hundreds of exhibits were introduced and thousands of pages of testimony compiled. Finally, on December 24, impartial arbitrator Clark Kerr and four “arbitrator advo-



The arbitration panel which resolved the 1984 contract dispute deliberates prior to issuing its award. At far right is impartial arbitrator Clark Kerr. To Kerr’s right is NALC General Counsel Bruce H. Simon.



ates” resolved the largest interest arbitration case ever conducted in the United States. The decision granted significant wage increases, retained the “uncapped” cost-of-living adjustment, and rejected the Service’s call for reductions in benefits in almost every area in the contract. However, in rejecting the Service’s proposal for a “two-tier” wage structure, the arbitration panel



NALC and American Postal Workers Union leaders march in front of Postal Headquarters in Washington, DC during the closing days of the 1987 negotiations.

stretched the single structure to include lower “steps” for new workers.

For the unions, the arbitration award was as great a victory as could reasonably have been expected. Still, the NALC recognized that the panel had added lower rungs to the pay ladder. Equally important was the fact that the contract had been fashioned by an arbitration panel, and not the parties themselves. This was a blow to the

collective bargaining process that the NALC did not want to see repeated.

But if the stalemated bargaining and subsequent arbitration of the 1984 contract was the low point of labor relations in the period following the Postal Reorganization Act, there were still reasons for optimism. First, the Postal Service was now well aware that the

arguments it had made with unrestrained confidence at negotiations had not persuaded an impartial third party. Arbitration had been a costly experience for the Service—one the Service itself would try to avoid in the future. Second, the NALC-USPS Employee Involvement process had survived the acrimony and name-calling that had pervaded both negotiations and the arbitration. In fact, the entire EI apparatus—work teams, steering committees, facilitators—functioned with only occasional interruptions throughout the last half of 1984.

That EI had outlasted the bitter process of creating the 1984 contract suggested that perhaps the next round of bargaining might be conducted with more candor and less hostility. Such proved to be the case in 1987 when the Postal Service bargained far less contentiously than it had previously. Despite substantial differences between the Service and the unions—chiefly over postal management’s call for the creation of a low-paid, part-time workforce—the parties reached agreement just hours after extending the deadline. NALC members ratified the proposed agreement overwhelmingly. Collective bargaining in the Postal Service was still viable.



PREPARING FOR NALC'S SECOND CENTURY

The final years of NALC's first century saw the union grappling with how best to fulfill the union's historic mission of serving the interests of letter carriers in the years ahead—years that would begin NALC's second century. This process of self-definition was in part a continuation of activities and processes begun earlier in the 1980s. Yet the union was also acknowledging that the challenges ahead were of a different order—and thus demanded different responses.

The central problems confronting the NALC at the end of the decade were the very same as those confronting the Postal Service. To a degree unprecedented in the Postal Service's history, the belief that the United States required a nationwide public institution to provide uniform mail service at uniform rates came under attack. Some of those leading the charge were ideological advocates of one or more "privatization" theories. These individuals wanted to reduce the size and scope of a public Postal Service, if not eliminate it altogether, on the assumption that the private sector of the economy could always outperform the public sector.

Other critics of the Postal Service—many of them speaking for large business mailers—were less sweeping and more

targeted in their attacks. In their minds, rates were too high and rate increases too frequent, postal management bloated and incompetent—and postal employees overpaid and underworked.

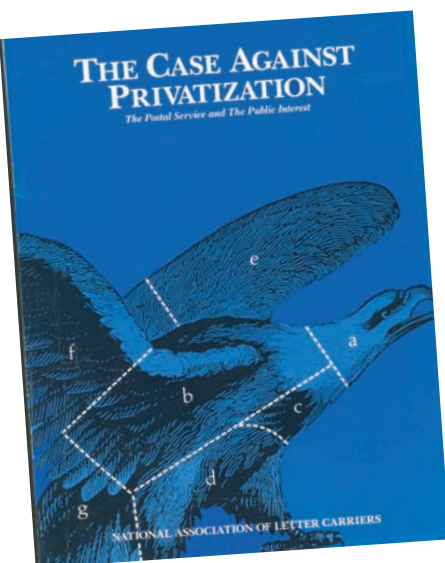
For the NALC, these criticisms—whether motivated by ideology or self-interest—focused attention on what the union's role should be when the very legitimacy of its sole employer was under intense scrutiny. The union's responses were several: first, by the late



1980s, it was clear that improved labor-management relations were essential. Recognizing that adversarial relationships and practices persisted at the local level despite the beneficial impact of the Employment Involvement process, Sombrotto and Postmaster General Anthony M. Frank agreed in 1988 to push the joint effort to improve the quality of work life more directly into the arena of labor-management relations. Union and management representatives were directed to reduce substantially the kinds of behavior leading to grievances and related adversarial activity during the coming fiscal year. By mid-1989, the parties were well on their way to reducing the grievances themselves. Whether carriers and their supervisors would, through the EI process, be able to

NALC President Vincent Sombrotto (right) and Postmaster General Anthony M. Frank sign a document in 1988 committing both parties to reducing grievances and other adversarial activity.

USPS photo



NALC AND THE MUSCULAR DYSTROPHY ASSOCIATION

A striking example of letter carriers' strong commitment to serving their fellow Americans beyond just delivering the mail is NALC's decades-long efforts to raise funds for the Muscular Dystrophy Association—a nonprofit organization combating neuromuscular diseases through programs of worldwide research, comprehensive medical and support services, and education.

NALC became MDA's first national sponsor in 1953. That fall the union conducted the "Letter Carriers' March for Muscular Dystrophy" featuring the union's "porch light brigade," the name attached to those carriers who repeated their appointed rounds late at night. Letter carriers collected \$3.4 million, and ever since have raised additional millions for MDA.

For many years, the highlight of NALC's participation was the union's live appearances on the annual Jerry Lewis MDA Labor Day Telethon, with a top national NALC officer in the spotlight. From 1986 through 2011, the Telethon also recognized the most successful fund-raising branches in different membership categories, and, for a number of years, an Auxiliary representative.

After the 2011 Telethon, MDA changed the name of the broadcast to "Show of Strength," shortened the length of the broadcast, and began to air taped segments provided by its sponsors. NALC has used this opportunity to call attention the union's commitment to MDA and to recognize the top fund-raising branches.

The dollar amount NALC announces on television each September is the product of such branch activities as raffles, golf tournaments, bingo nights. The union has also developed nationwide programs. In 2009, the union began an annual "Bowlathon," and in 2011, NALC initiated an annual "Fill the Satchel" fund-raiser where carriers, often in uniform and carrying their satchels, stand at busy streets, holding signs and accepting donations from people in passing cars and pedestrians.

In recognition of the role branches playing in raising funds for MDA, the national union and MDA each year take representatives of the top fund-raising branches on an MDA-related trip.

From 1986 until 2011, NALC members from the top fund-raising branches in various membership categories appeared live on the MDA Labor Day Telethon, often along with the NALC president.

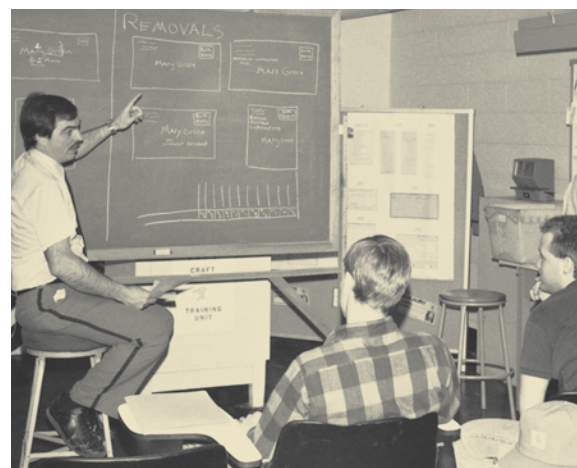
change the kinds of behavior that had prompted grievance activity was still an open question.

By this time, it had become obvious that if the Postal Service were to survive and prosper, the NALC and the Postal Service at the highest levels of both organizations would have to work together on a variety of workplace and non-workplace issues. That this might be achieved had been demonstrated when the parties successfully conducted a joint legislative campaign in December 1987 and early 1988.

The Reagan administration and the Congress had agreed to a budget resolution which, while preventing the Service from raising rates, would force the USPS to cut services and all but halt its capital spending program. NALC and the Postal Service, joined by other postal organizations, pulled together to fight this move. Together Sombrotto and Postmaster General Preston R. Tisch visited congressmen and senators to explain the postal community's positions. As a result, Congress scaled back the Reagan administration's proposals substantially, although still forcing the Postal Service to reduce services and postpone some construction projects.

Less visible than this union-management legislative effort was NALC's recognition that if letter carrier work was to change because of the automation of postal operations, the NALC should be a partner in redesigning and restructuring





the work of carriers. An outgrowth of the 1987 negotiations, a joint task force to study all aspects of carrier work—from equipment to the design of routes to the method of determining compensation—began work in the spring of 1989. With the task force's recommendations perhaps months, if not years, away, carriers could at least be assured that for the first time their union would be a partner in managing and directing change—rather than simply reacting to it.

But cooperation with the Postal Service, both on the workroom floor and on Capitol Hill, was only one of NALC's strategies to preserve the Service and, as a result, the jobs and benefits of letter carriers. By the end of the 1980s it was obvious that only a strong, stable and professional organization could successfully repel challenges to members' rights and interests by the Executive Branch, Congress or the Postal Service while simultaneously working with postal management to improve labor-management relations and defend the Service from external attacks. Fortunately, the NALC had already taken steps to prepare for this task.

Attempts to achieve internal stability began soon after Sombrotto assumed office in 1979. At the 1980 National Convention in Atlanta, the NALC Executive Council proposed extending the terms of national officers from two to four years. Although the convention delegates defeated the proposed amendment—reminding Sombrotto that he had opposed similar amendments when vying for national leader-

ship—delegates to the San Francisco convention two years later passed an identical amendment. No longer would officers begin campaigning for their next term immediately upon assuming office. For Sombrotto and his fellow officers elected with only occasional opposition during the decade, the amendment recreated the stability that had marked NALC politics before the 1970s. But whether stability would lead to stagnation as the amendment's opponents had charged remained an issue only time would decide.

Sombrotto and his administration now turned to the task of achieving long-run financial stability. After acrimonious debate, delegates at the 1984 convention in Las Vegas, Nevada, approved an amendment establishing a "minimum dues structure." Dues would now increase as carriers' wages rose. Thus NALC presidents would not be forced to ask convention delegates every two years for additional funds to pay for the union's increasing expenses.

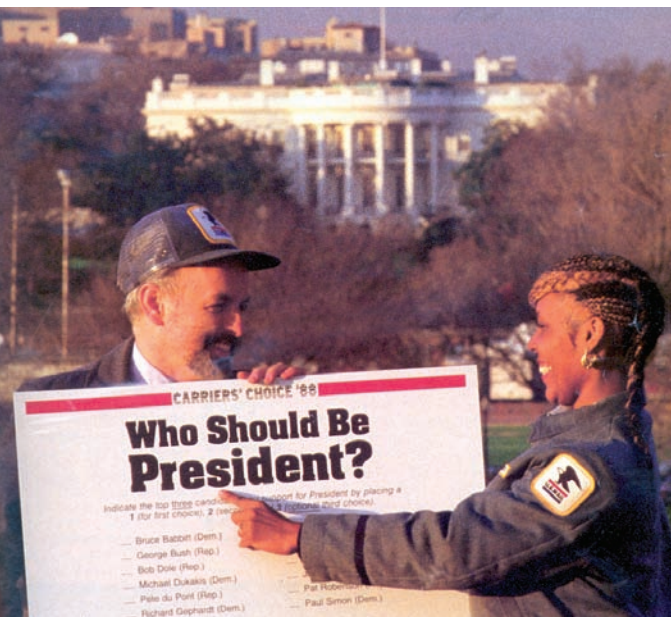
But a growing NALC bank balance would be worthless unless the union

could improve its capacity to respond to the critical issues facing both the Postal Service and letter carriers. This the union did during the remainder of the 1980s. Staff was added in such areas as contract administration, legislation, legal, communications, economic research, information services, computers, retired members services, and public relations, and the union's Washington, DC headquarters building was renovated to accommodate the new personnel. New publica-

tions were created, existing ones improved, and the union began to use videotape to communicate with the membership. With the talents of additional professionals, the union's operations became more sophisticated and effective, and the union's status within the labor movement grew.

The NALC had been represented on the AFL-CIO Executive Council since 1981 when Sombrotto's election as a Federation vice president gave the union a seat on the country's most important labor body for the first time since William C. Doherty served on the Council in the 1950s and early 1960s. But participation in the Federation was only one aspect of NALC's greater visibility in the labor movement. Internationally, the union became increasingly active during the decade in Postal Telegraph and Telephone

Participation in the nation's political process has been essential for the NALC to continue to protect the rights, benefits and economic security of letter carriers.





CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

If history is a continuous, if zigzagging, record of human existence, then from time to time there are markers that organize the past and give cause for celebration. NALC's Centennial in August 1989 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where the union had been founded 100 years earlier, was such an occasion. There, more than 5,000 letter carriers, retirees, auxiliary members, families and friends attended four days of commemorative activities to honor the past and learn from it.

Highlights of the event were the arrival at the opening ceremonies of a giant Centennial envelope sent during the preceding months to each of the 50 states in the union for ceremonial postmarking; a 12,000-square-foot historical exhibit that displayed nearly a thousand documents, artifacts, photographs, vehicles and uniforms evoking key events in

letter carrier and union history; educational seminars highlighting the past and the future of letter carriers; "The Letter," a 90-minute musical tour through NALC history that blended real events with elaborate fantasies and thought-provoking commentary on the role of the NALC and letter carriers in American society; a first day of issue ceremony unveiling a new stamp honoring letter carriers; and the dramatic close of the festivities directly across the street from the site of NALC's founding meeting where a bronze statue commemorating America's letter carriers was unveiled.

Specifically designed to be festive, the Centennial Celebration was also educational and reflective because only by understanding the past can the union properly prepare for the challenges ahead.

International—the Geneva-based group uniting worldwide unions representing postal and other communications workers which later, through mergers, became part of the larger, more broadly based Union Network International, or UNI. Closer to home, the union took a leadership role in both a union-dominated coalition which in 1985 and 1986 mounted a successful effort for tax reform, and the development of the Fund for Assuring an Independent Retirement—or FAIR—a group of postal and federal unions and employee associations whose legislative interests were far broader than its name would suggest.

That NALC's increasing prominence in the labor movement was largely in the area of legislation was hardly surprising since by the mid-1980s, the NALC had developed one of the labor movement's most effective grassroots lobbying organizations and arguably the most successful political action fund. But beginning in April 1987, the union took a giant step forward by establishing an educational program—"WIN," for "We're Involved Now"—to teach grassroots lobbying and politics to thousands of NALC and Auxiliary members throughout

the country. The 152 WIN workshops conducted by November 1988 also mobilized NALC members, principally retirees and Auxiliary members, to take an active part in the 1988 presidential campaign, and for the first time NALC members won delegate positions to a national political party convention.

Although still hampered severely by the 50-year-old Hatch Act's limitations on partisan political activity of postal and federal employees—limitations the union made substantial progress toward overturning during the late 1980s—carriers nevertheless recognized that participation in the nation's political process was essential if the National Association of Letter Carriers were to continue to protect the rights, benefits and economic security of letter carriers.

