

1902-1912

# THE REIGN OF TERROR

**P**olitical agitation by letter carriers and the NALC did not go unnoticed in the government. Many members of Congress were bitterly opposed to the very existence of the NALC, believing that the organization was subversive and hence dangerous to American democracy. Interestingly enough, however, when federal laborers, workmen and mechanics first organized in the 1830s, the federal government did not challenge employees' right to unionize or even to strike. It was only when letter carriers and postal clerks—distinctly government employees rather than workers who might labor for anyone—formed unions that the government began to oppose organization. It based its opposition on a newly established principle: the government, as a sovereign employer, had rights and privileges above and beyond those of other employers and thus could impose any conditions it wished on its employees.



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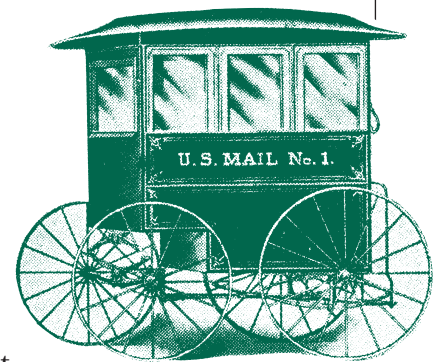
The first of a series of executive actions seeking to stamp out the NALC and other postal organizations was issued in 1895. Irritated with the increasing political activity of the NALC and the clerks' organizations, the postmaster general published an order prohibiting postal employees from visiting Washington, DC to influence legislation. This order, poorly enforced and widely ignored, was an important foreshadowing of what was to come, for in the 1900s when letter carriers and other postal employees lobbied vigorously for a pay raise and other legislation, conservative leaders in Congress complained to the president.

President Theodore Roosevelt, too, had been deluged with telegrams, letters and petitions from postal workers and their supporters. So on January 31, 1902, he seized the offensive and issued the first of the famous "gag orders." Roosevelt's executive order forbade all postal and federal employees, "directly or indirectly, individually or through associations," to solicit members of Congress for wage increases or to try to influence the passage of any other legislation—except through the heads of their department. The order, an attempt to muzzle or gag organizations like the

NALC, effectively deprived government workers of their constitutional rights to speak freely and to petition the government.

The NALC was thunderstruck at the gag rule's infringement of its rights and the rights of all letter carriers. The government's fierce opposition and oppression were completely inappropriate given the relatively mild—if irritating—activity in which the NALC was engaged: lobbying, election activity, and other political pressures. But the NALC's organizational strength and the open support it received from the organized labor movement undoubtedly intensified the government's fears. And although it was customary for members of Congress to pressure letter carriers for support prior to an election campaign, it was a relatively new and uncomfortable experience to have that pressure reversed.

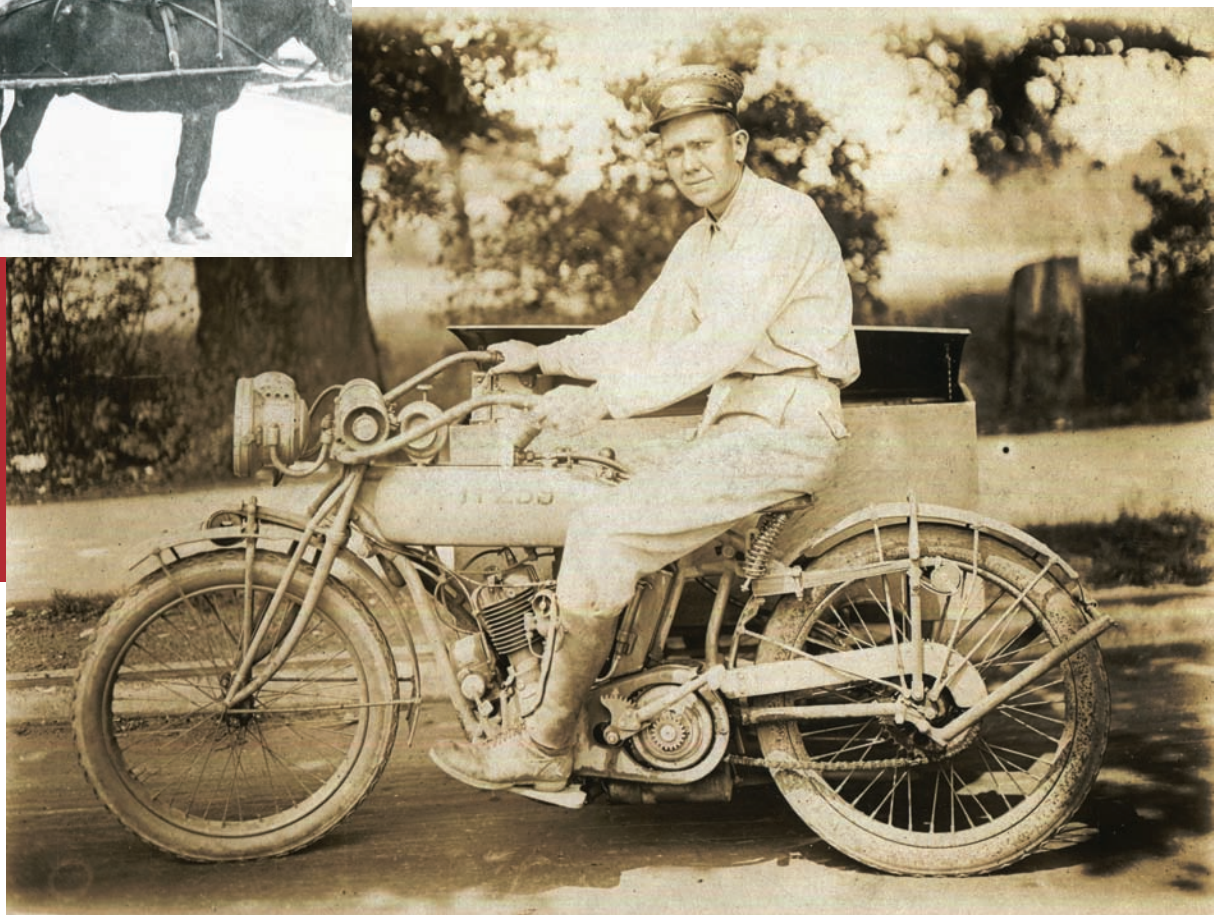
The gag rule of 1902 was only the beginning of the reign of terror inflicted by the government and Post Office Department. In 1906, Roosevelt issued another executive order that permitted department heads to dismiss employees without notice and—contrary to previous practices—without stating the reasons in writing. In addition, letter carri-





While the Post Office was still using horse-drawn vehicles to deliver the mail in the early 1900s (as in Oakland, CA, pictured above), it was also experimenting with motorized vehicles, including motorcycles.

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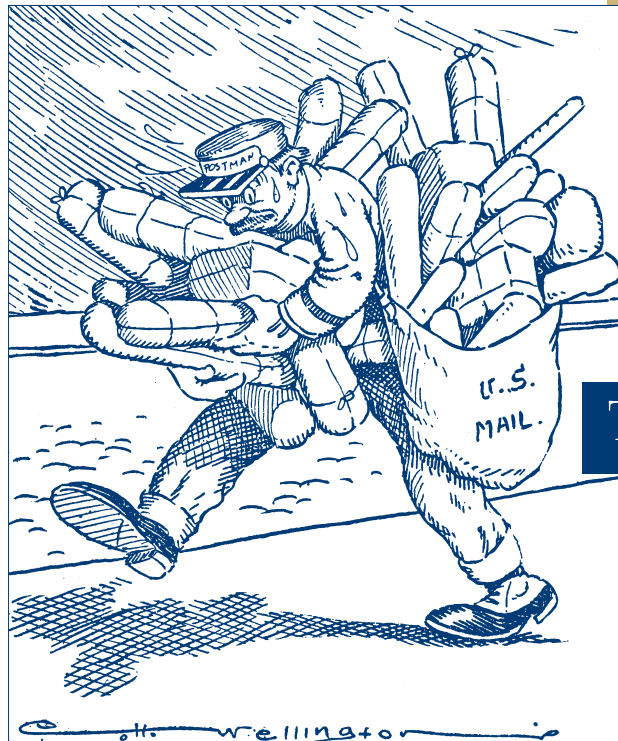
ers and postal clerks could no longer discuss their working conditions in public. Finally, in 1909, President William Howard Taft forbade postal and federal employees from answering congressional requests for information on their pay or working conditions unless authorized to do so by their department heads.

The NALC and other postal organizations did not know how to respond to this massive governmental attack. Although the president of the NALC, James C. Keller, personally presented a memorandum to Roosevelt stating the NALC's objection to the 1902 executive order, the gag was not rescinded. In the end, the NALC accepted the gag as a recognized rule of federal government because the union believed it was important to maintain good relations with the Post Office Department. As Keller stated in 1903:

*We know that to enjoy the better conditions, we must earn them, and earning them, we must secure them in the right manner. For should we attempt to secure any benefits by*

*questionable methods, we, as government employees, would bring discredit upon ourselves as well as the service in which we are engaged.*

Acceptance of the gag, however, certainly did not mean the NALC ceased representing its members. The Association continued to fight for legislation, but the gag rule's prohibition of open legislative activities made it far more difficult for the union to have a direct impact on issues of concern to carriers. To circumvent the gag, NALC representatives and other letter carriers talked to their congressional friends on an informal and private basis—but always with the realization that, if caught, they would be punished. Furthermore, the gag rule allowed the NALC to endorse legislation which the Department itself had already approved. Frustrating as this indirect role was, the NALC remained as active as it could in the legislative arena, obtaining a modest pay increase in 1907.



The New York Evening Journal

Not surprisingly, however, as working conditions deteriorated and the morale of all postal employees plummeted, militant factions arose in the ranks of postal workers, especially the railway postal clerks. Unrest, defiance of orders, work stoppages and threats of formal strikes erupted throughout the service, particularly after the last gag order in 1909. And in spite of the Department's efforts to prevent it, the complaints of workers—including letter carriers—finally reached Congress.

By 1910, when the Democrats won control of the House of Representatives, the political climate had changed. Robert LaFollette, a progressive Republican Senator from Wisconsin, led an anti-gag campaign. NALC President William E. Kelly urged passage of anti-gag legislation before the Senate Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads, and Samuel

Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, also actively supported removal of the gag from the mouths of postal and federal workers and their unions. Unfortunately, the President of the United States, William Howard Taft, participated in the campaign by publicly defending the gag rule in 1911:

*Government employees are a privileged class upon whose entry into government service it is entirely reasonable to impose conditions that should not and ought not be imposed upon those who serve private employers.*

Yet despite Taft's plea, the Congress of the United States decided the government's claim of special status had gone too far. On August 24, 1912, the Lloyd-LaFollette Act was enacted, rescinding the gag rule and ending 10 years of severe repression of letter carriers and other government workers.

## THE POSTMAN

*There's a man about the town,  
Climbing up and coming down  
On his round;  
And he brings us cheerful news,  
Or perhaps a case of blues,  
Twice a day.*

*With a sure and patient pace,  
With a keen and kindly face,  
He comes 'round;  
He is whole-souled and discreet,  
And wears half-soles on his feet  
Toward the ground.*

*There's an angle in his back,  
Made by that eternal pack  
That he bears;  
But the public never knows,  
Nor would any one suppose,  
That he cares.*

*Is the weather scorching hot?  
He complains not of his lot  
Nor is sad;  
Does there come a zero spell?  
His refrain is "All is well,"  
And he's glad.*

*Bearer of the nation's load.  
Packhorse of the path and road.  
He is true  
To his trust and to his task—  
Almost anything you ask  
He will do.*

*Postman, nameless though you be  
I have carved a niche for thee  
In my heart;  
Postman with the sloping back,  
Half-soled shoes and heavy sack.  
Play your part!*

—Austin, Texas



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## THE NO-STRIKE AMENDMENT

**T**he Lloyd-LaFollette Act of 1912 was the most important piece of legislation affecting the rights of letter carriers and the NALC until 1962 when John F. Kennedy issued Executive Order 10988 establishing a formal labor relations program in the federal government. Besides outlawing the gag rule and guaranteeing government workers the right to petition and lobby Congress, the Lloyd-LaFollette Act recognized the right of postal and federal employees to organize and join labor organizations. The legislation, however, contained one proviso: it

forbade postal employees from affiliating with any outside organization which imposed “an obligation or duty...to engage in any strike against the United States” or which proposed to assist postal employees in such a strike. This no-strike amendment was inserted at the last moment to ease the minds of those senators who feared that affiliation with the American Federation of Labor might draw postal and federal workers into a strike against the government.

At the same time Congress passed the Lloyd-LaFollette Act in 1912, it also passed two other bills: The Reilly Eight-in-Ten Hour Act and the Mann Sunday Closing Act. The Reilly law, legislation which the NALC had been working for since 1909, specified that postal employees could not be required to spread their eight-hour shift over a period of more than 10 consecutive hours. This act ended the cruel practice of making employees—especially union activists—work around-the-clock on a “stop and go” basis. The second law mandated the closing of post offices on Sunday, assuring letter carriers and postal clerks one day of rest in seven.

All in all, 1912 was not a bad year for letter carriers and the NALC.

## MUTUAL BENEFIT ASSOCIATION

**F**rom its earliest years, the NALC pioneered programs for mutual support and welfare to complement its struggles for improved working conditions. Even before the union was founded in 1889, letter carriers in several cities had formed local mutual aid associations that provided mutual support and welfare.

By 1891, the fledgling national union took on this responsibility when it established the Mutual Benefit Association at its Detroit

convention. Incorporated the next year in Tennessee, the MBA offered low-cost life and other kinds of insurance to help protect letter carriers and their families.

A second program, the National Sick Benefit Association, was established at the NALC’s convention in Portland, Oregon in 1905. It was organized primarily for members in smaller branches, since most of the large branches had already set up their own sick benefit plans. The Association provided

benefits of \$8 a week for up to 20 weeks to carriers unable to work due to accident or illness; insurance premiums were between 55 and 80 cents per month.

Today, the U.S. Letter Carriers Mutual Benefit Association, run by elected union officers, makes available to members life insurance, annuities and hospital confinement coverage products—thus continuing the NALC’s long tradition of mutual support and assistance.

## NALC AUXILIARY

**L**aboring under oppressive working conditions, poorly paid and unable to lobby Congress for wage increases or other legislation to improve their plight, letter carriers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries turned to the women in their families for support in the fight for dignity and security at the workplace.

As a result, a number of local “Ladies Auxiliaries” were formed, but with the issuance of President Theodore Roosevelt’s infamous 1902 gag order, it became even clearer that a unified national effort was necessary.

Responding to an organizing call from Portland, Oregon Branch 82’s Ladies Auxiliary, 72 women from 52 cities in 26 states met September 5, 1905 during NALC’s fifth national convention in Portland to form a National Ladies Auxiliary, forerunner of today’s NALC Auxiliary. They unanimously elected as the organization’s first president Nellie Heffelfinger, a member of Branch 24’s Auxiliary in Los Angeles. Their goal, Heffelfinger stated, was to “aid wherever possible the carriers, both socially and financially.” Four days later, NALC’s delegates formally recognized its new partner during the union’s convention when, not coincidentally, the union had implicitly recognized the importance of women voters to its legislative endeavors by adopting a resolution in support of women’s suffrage, still 15 years in the future.

Roosevelt issued a second gag order in 1906, and President William Howard Taft further

restricted the rights of postal and federal workers three years later—both additional gag orders making the Auxiliary’s role championing letter carrier rights more essential. Although the 1912 Lloyd-LaFollette Act lifted the gag orders, the National Ladies Auxiliary grew steadily, creating new local auxiliaries throughout the country and, beginning in 1921, state auxiliaries. Simultaneously it played an important role in the union’s legislative campaigns for salary increases, Sunday post office closings, shorter Saturday work days, paid sick leave, 40-hour work weeks, and the establishment of the Civil Service Retirement System in 1920. The passage of the 1939 Hatch Act prohibiting partisan political activity by postal and federal workers also reinforced the importance of the Auxiliary in fighting for letter carriers wages, benefits and fair working conditions.

As women entered the carrier workforce in the 1960s, men became eligible for Auxiliary memberships, and in 1974, the organization dropped “Ladies” from its title. Open to all family members age 16 and above for decades, the organization still consists primarily of the wives and female relatives of male letter carriers. The advent of collective bargaining moved many key issues from the legislative arena to the negotiating table, and Hatch Act reform legislation in 1993 has allowed active carriers to participate more fully in electoral politics. Nonetheless, the NALC Auxiliary remains an essential part of the union’s legislative program.

### The first officers of NALC’s National Ladies Auxiliary



President  
**Nellie Heffelfinger**  
Los Angeles, CA



Vice President  
**Dora M. Carl**  
Toledo, OH



Secretary  
**Grace O. Wheeler**  
Portland, OR



Treasurer  
**Mary E. Curtin**  
Lynn, MA