

1921-1928

THE DAWN OF A NEW DAY

In 1921, the new president, Warren G. Harding, usually regarded as one of the worst presidents of the United States, appointed a new postmaster general, Will H. Hays, to succeed the much-hated Burlison.

Four days after taking office, Hays electrified all postal employees with this proclamation:

Every effort shall be exercised to humanize the ... [post office department]. Labor is not a commodity... There are 300,000 employees. They have the brain[s] and they have the hand[s] to do the job well; and they shall have the heart to do it well.

Seven days later, on March 16, Hays invited the president of the NALC, Edward J. Gainor, and the leaders of other postal organizations to meet for informal discussions. At the meeting, he announced an open-door policy to the leaders of the postal unions and invited them to see him whenever they had a problem.

Letter carriers responded enthusiastically to Hays' proclamation and his positive attitude toward the NALC. The April 1921 issue of *The Postal Record* described the outpouring of good feeling in an article entitled "The Dawn of a New Day":





National Postal Museum Library

A parcel post carrier from Indianapolis in 1923.

A CHANGE IN TACTICS

Although Hays' term of office was brief, his administration set the tone for relations between the NALC and the Department for the rest of the decade. As a result of this climate of mutual respect, the NALC—which by this time had created one of the most successful lobbies on Capitol Hill—decided to seize the offensive in the fall of 1923 when it embarked on a major campaign to achieve a living wage for postal

employees. This campaign, led by the NALC but waged by all the postal unions, was one of the biggest in the history of postal unionism.

Letter carriers' wages in the early 1920s were miserably inadequate. The 1920 salary bill—which had raised letter carrier salaries to between \$1,400 and \$1,800 per year—was obsolete the day it was passed. And in the rapidly expanding economy of the early 1920s, the wages of letter carriers and other postal workers lagged further and further behind the wages of workers in the private sector.

The salary campaign opened at the NALC's 24th Biennial Convention in 1923 in Providence, Rhode Island, and spread to every congressional district in the country. Acting on the advice of NALC National Headquarters, many local branches formed special campaign committees and enlisted the support of local associations of postal clerks, rural letter carriers, railway mail clerks, and even supervisory officials. These committees presented their case to patrons, Boards of Commerce, representatives and senators. Mass meetings

THE SUB BY B.F. ELLISON JR., LOS ANGELES

*See that poor ragged
Hungry looking guy,
Working when he can
And trying to get by!
Wondering how and where
He'll get his next grub—
Folks call him "The Mail Man,"
But he's just a Sub.*

*He goes home at night
To his wife and his child
Ashamed of his plight
And more worries pile;
His purpose beaten
By fate's blunt cruel club—
Folks call him "The Mail Man,"
But he's just a Sub.*

*But, what does he get—
He's done no one harm;
The rain and the wet,
The snow and the storm,
Still he does his best
Though he plays the dub—
Folks call him "The Mail Man,"
But he's just a Sub.*

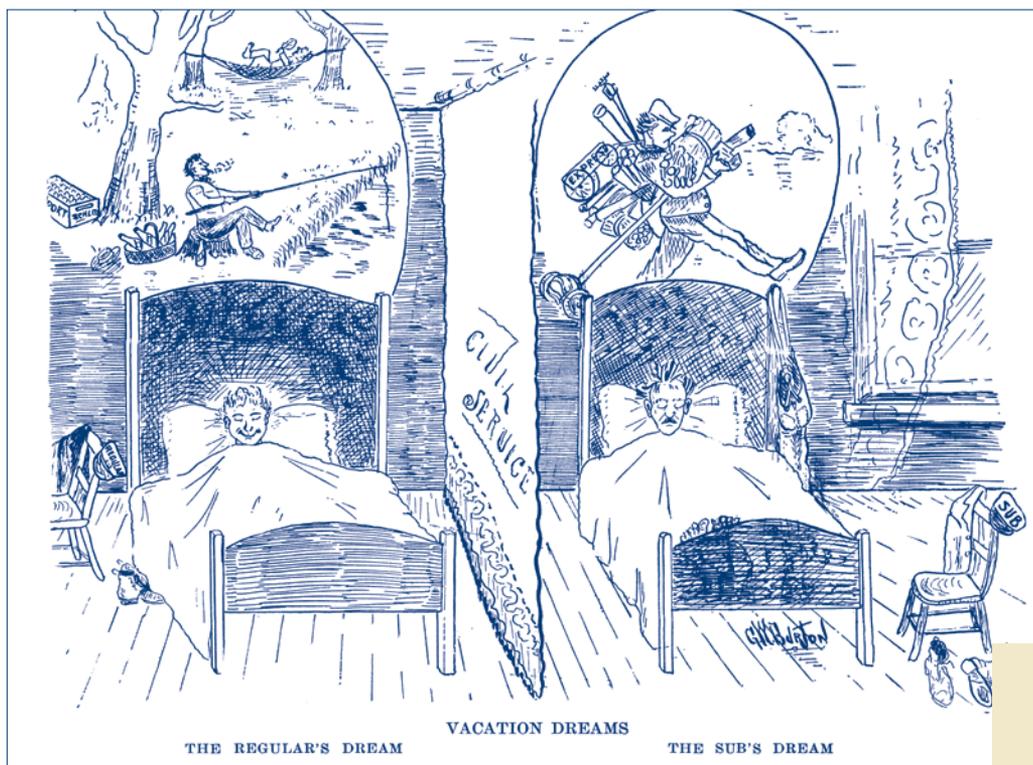
*Of course he's a man—
A good worker, too,
But often he's told:
"There's nothing to do."
When in fact there is—
Piles, in many a tub—
Folks call him "The Mail Man,"
But he's just a Sub.*

*Reports for duty
Real early at dawn,
Waits and hangs around
Till the Regulars are gone.
He's treated just like
A cigarette stub—
Folks call him "The Mail Man,"
But he's just a Sub.*

*"No Work Today,"
But I stuck around
In hopes they would say
For you work's been found,
But useless it was
They gave me the rub—
Folks call me "The Mail Man,"
But I'm just a Sub.*

*Nice little dainties
For kiddies to eat—
Good wholesome food
And much needed meat—
How can he buy them?
No money, poor cub—
Folks call him "The Mail Man,"
But he's just a Sub.*

*Isn't there some way
To lighten his load
So he can pay—
The bills he has owed?
Sure, he's a good sport
But tires of being snubbed—
Folks call him "The Mail Man,"
But he's just a Sub.*



of postal employees were held in cities and towns as diverse as Piqua, Ohio, and New York City. A letter carrier from Pittsburgh proclaimed “\$2,400 or bust” in *The Postal Record*, and added:

The days for idle talk are past, and the time for action is here. Let every postal employee take a hand in this affair, and make the halls of Congress echo and re-echo with the voice of the people.

The campaign was so effective that some members of Congress, irritated with the tidal wave of letters supporting a wage increase, criticized the NALC and the other postal organizations. Nevertheless, in June 1924, a bill was passed that increased wages by \$300 a year to a maximum level of \$2,100 and raised substitutes’ wages to 65 cents an hour. Not only did the bill pass, but it passed by overwhelming majorities: 73-3 in the Senate and 361-6 in the House.

The NALC’s success was short-lived—despite widespread support for the bill, President Coolidge vetoed it. And the veto took a particularly damaging form: Congress received the veto message the same day it adjourned for the fall elections, making it impossible to override the president’s action.

By the time the Congress reassembled on December 1, 1924, the mood and temper were different. William C. Doherty, later the president of the NALC, described the congressional about-face: “They did not love us in December as they did in June.” The NALC and other postal organizations lobbied frantically but, in the end, failed to obtain the necessary support. Coolidge’s veto was sustained by a single vote in the Senate on January 6, 1925.

Although disappointed, the NALC did not give up as it made clear in the July 1924 *Postal Record*:

The salary campaign will go on to successful conclusion.... We will march on to certain success. Thrice armed is he whose cause is just. We will not fail.

On February 28, 1925—after a renewed campaign of intensive lobbying—the NALC and the other postal unions won the wage fight when Coolidge reluctantly signed new legislation that incorporated the salary provisions of the earlier bill.

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