



1990-2002

FACING REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE

For well over a century, the job of a city carrier had hardly changed at all. True, carriers had switched from horse and buggy to motorized vehicle in the years since the beginning of city delivery in 1863. Nonetheless, by the end of the 1980s, carriers still cased all of their mail in the office before going out on the street. Changes in mail processing in the preceding decades, important in increasing the overall efficiency of the Postal Service, had largely bypassed the working lives of letter carriers.

As NALC began its second century, carrier work was revolutionized as optical character reading and bar code scanning technology allowed the Service to arrange the mail in the sequence of delivery. By the beginning of the 1990s, delivery point sequence mail, DPS for short, began to arrive at the carrier's case, resulting in the reduction of the amount of time carriers spent in the office while conversely expanding carriers' time on the street. Although the revolutionary changes in how carriers performed their work did not take place overnight and did not affect every delivery unit simultaneously, they affected labor relations on the workroom floor and at the negotiating table both positively and negatively. In fact, virtually every aspect of the relationship between the union and postal management felt the impact of DPS mail.



More than 1,000 NALC members participated in the AFL-CIO's massive 1991 Solidarity Day rally in Washington, DC in support of the American labor movement's goals.

For the NALC, there were two key issues: how would routes be structured as DPS made its slow but relentless entry into the workplace, and what role would the union have in shaping decisions concerning DPS before these decisions were made. These questions were answered almost immediately, as management adopted, without the union's involvement or consent, a program ironically called "route stabilization"—or "6 and 2." Under "route stabilization," management planned to readjust, prior to the implementation of automation, all the routes in an office to conform to what management believed would be the workload both in the office and on the street once the amount of DPS mail arriving in the facility reached management's target

figure. As a result, carriers' street time would be extended and office time reduced—as would be the number of regular routes in the delivery unit. Carriers would no longer case all the mail they delivered—"routers" would case a sizeable portion of the mail the regular carrier would then deliver.

As soon as "6 and 2" was introduced in test sites around the country in the late 1980s, NALC strongly objected, informing management that route stabilization would delay the mail, disrupt operations and create chaos and low morale on the workroom floor. This proved to be the case as starting times were moved back and carriers were compelled to deliver more and more mail later in the day or evening to increasingly disgruntled customers



In response to management's unilateral readjustment of routes prior to the implementation of automation, NALC formed "truth squads" twice in the 1990s to monitor the changes and ensure that branch representatives filed grievances whenever the adjustment did not conform to the contract.

unhappy with the reliability of their mail service.

As management proceeded to implement route stabilization over the union's objections and in the face of customers' complaints, the NALC realized it was time to draw a line in the sand. In December 1990 at his installation to a fifth term as NALC national president, Vincent R. Sombrotto announced that the union was forming a cadre of "truth squads" throughout the country to monitor route adjustments and ensure that branch representatives filed grievances any time management adjusted routes without conforming to the contract or those USPS manuals and handbooks that regulated route adjustments. The program itself—labeled "Best Efforts" as an offshoot of Sombrotto's remark that carriers should give the Postal Service their "best efforts" but no more and no less—spread throughout the country during 1991 and the first part of 1992.

Despite the success of "Best Efforts" in giving branch representatives and rank-and-file carriers the tools to resist management's efforts to deploy "6 and 2," no amount of logic or persuasion—or customer complaints—could deter management from proceeding with the program. Not until the issuance in July 1992 of a national-level arbitration award in a Hempstead, New York case did the dispute over route stabilization begin a slow and tortuous path toward resolution. The decision held that management could not re-adjust routes solely to anticipate the future impact of delivery-point sequencing. Yet the arbitrator's decision explicitly left critical issues for the parties to resolve themselves. This they successfully achieved in September 1992 by agreeing to six memorandums that established criteria for dealing with grievances involving past "Hempstead-type" route adjustments. At the core of

the memorandums were provisions halting all route adjustments based upon the anticipated impact of automation and an agreement that local management and NALC branches should reach decisions jointly on such key issues as case configurations during route inspections, the creation of so-called "X-routes" to be phased out when a set amount of mail prepared in delivery point sequence arrived in the delivery unit, and the hiring of transitional employees. This new category of worker was inserted over the union's objections into the 1990 contract by an arbitrator after management had claimed the need for temporary employees during the introduction of delivery point sequencing.

Sombrotto and management also agreed in late 1992 to give the approximately 30,000 part-time flexibles then on the rolls the opportunity to convert to full-time status. In the summer of 1993, the union and management again demonstrated the ability to work together by giving the more senior transitional employees an opportunity to acquire career status. The parties also incorporated what they had learned in the field about DPS implementation into a single memorandum that also provided that the union and management would jointly test modified route inspections and adjustments at selected sites already receiving mail in delivery point sequence. Building on an extensive training effort, joint route inspections were implemented throughout the country during the fall of 1993. Simultaneously, NALC and management met at the national level to resolve a number of issues of critical importance to the



At the 1993 Rap Session in Chicago, President Sombrotto and other national officers answer questions raised by carriers on automation issues including delivery point sequencing, part-time flexible conversions and the use of temporary employees.

NALC FOOD DRIVE

From the inception of city delivery in the nineteenth century, letter carriers have always demonstrated compassion toward their customers and their communities. Perhaps the most visible and far reaching example has been annual NALC National Food Drive—a venture the union launched in the early 1990s, and which quickly became one of the most significant examples of volunteerism in America.

Prior to the union inaugurating a national drive, a number of NALC branches had collected food for the needy locally on different days during the year. Drawing in part on lessons learned from Phoenix Branch 576's highly successful drive, the national union decided to hold a pilot drive in October 1991 on the same day in 10 cities. This proved so successful that it was expanded into a nationwide effort. Input from food banks and pantries, however, suggested that late spring would be a better time because most food banks start running out of the donations received during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday periods. A revamped drive was organized for May 15, 1993—the Second Saturday in May—with amazing results. More than 220 branches collected over 11 million pounds of food as letter carriers from Alaska to Florida, from Maine to Hawaii, collected the donations while delivering their routes.

Over the years, the NALC Food Drive has been benefitted greatly from the support of many groups, especially Campbell Soup Company, the Postal Service, Feeding America (formerly America's Second Harvest), United Way of America and local United Ways, the AFL-CIO Community Services network, and, more recently, AARP. In addition, noted cartoonist Bil Keane and, later, his son Jeff, have donated artwork based on their famous "Family Circus" cartoon characters to promote the NALC Food Drive.

In a typical year, letter carriers in well over 1,000 NALC branches in more than 10,000 cities and towns in all 50 states and U.S. jurisdictions typically provide at least 70 million pounds of food to over 5,000 community food banks and pantries, making the NALC National Food Drive the nation's largest annual one-day drive.

By 2014, twenty-one years after the inaugural NALC National Food Drive, letter carriers had collected a total of more than 1.3 billion pounds of food to be distributed to the nation's needy, underscoring the union's historic commitment to serving their customers and communities.



implementation of DPS, including the question of how many bundles certain carriers could carry.

Unfortunately, the Service's duplicity soon became evident as management abandoned agreements it had previously reached while also crafting new proposals the union could never accept. First, the Service walked away from its agreement to give career opportu-

nities to transitional employees and then tried to force NALC to accept additional transitional employees in the city carrier craft. Not only did the union aggressively resist management's efforts, but the bad feelings the Service engendered led to a breakdown of the ongoing negotiations over the rules and guidelines to govern the introduction of delivery point sequencing into the carrier workplace. In fact, once management fully understood the union would not agree to an expansion of the transitional employee workforce, it reversed itself on a number of other DPS-related issues where agreements had been reached, including the joint determination of which routes would be eliminated due to automation. Management also sent to the field in March 1994 DPS implementation instructions that unilaterally changed jointly agreed-upon interpretations of the six September 1992 memos and also unilaterally changed, without proper notice, specific handbooks pertaining to work practices. In sum, management decided to implement DPS without the NALC's participation and partnership.

The NALC immediately responded by filing national-level grievances challenging the Service's implementation instructions and also announcing the creation of new "Truth Squad" training to update the successful 1990 "Truth Squad" route inspection program aimed at monitoring and challenging management's actions in the field. Moreover, the union continued to maintain that to reduce, if not virtually eliminate, missed deliveries and "non-deliveries" inevitably resulting from an imperfect mail processing automation

program, carriers should case DPS mail until the volume was such that it would be inefficient and counter to the thrust of the Service's automation program for the carrier to continue casing this mail.

Management refused to deal with this issue, and in late February 1996 ended abruptly and emphatically any discussions with the NALC about how best to shape the USPS automation program. The Postal Service's disdain for the contributions of the union and its members was hammered home just two months later when management unilaterally withdrew from the 14-year joint Employee Involvement process, an act NALC protested to both the Postal Service and Congress.

Management's increasingly hostile attitude toward the union, coupled with its "go-it-alone" practices in adapting carrier work to the automation of mail processing, continued into the mid- and late 1990s. In fact, in 1996, the Postal Service laid the groundwork for a massive violation of the collective bargaining agreement by unilaterally beginning to plan, and in some cases implement, a number of test studies and pilot programs.

Although employing different names and different statistical methods, the entire effort was most commonly referred to as "Delivery Redesign" and focused on three related goals: how carriers should be managed, how an eight-hour day should be defined and how letter carrier work should be organized. Essentially, the Service wished to combine old-fashioned time-measurement studies designed to devise a time value for every possible physical movement of a letter carrier in the office and on the street—an updated version of the ill-fated Kokomo experiments of the 1970s—with a related approach that derived numerical values from existing data on carrier performance and route structures in order to reorganize carrier work. The

NALC immediately recognized that management was attempting to divide the membership and weaken the union by testing and unilaterally polling carriers to obtain information that could eventually speed up carrier work and undercut the union's ability to defend its members. Immediately the union responded, informing both branch leadership as well as rank-and-file members of management's plans and encouraging carriers, especially those who were being tested, to band together to resist any attempts by their supervisors to prod them to violate safety regulations or otherwise ignore the "fair day's work for a fair day's pay" principle enshrined in the collective bargaining agreement.

Largely in reaction to the union's resistance, management stepped back from its plans to unilaterally introduce new work standards and practices. In October 1997, the NALC and the Postal Service agreed to jointly test how to change carrier work to meet the future needs of the Service and the inevitable changes in the mail environment resulting from the explosion in electronic communications and commerce. Although specifically stating that the union was not approving management's Delivery Redesign programs or any tests management was implementing unilaterally, the compact recognized that for the Service to be efficient, productive and competitive, "it is in the interests of both management and the union that the parties work cooperatively." Two months later, the NALC Executive Council appointed branch presidents and rank-and-file carriers to a joint union-management task force to explore possible changes in the structure of letter carrier work.

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Letter carriers delivered an urgent message to the public nationwide on June 19, 1996: Mismanagement is ruining the Postal Service. Above, President Sombrotto joined Washington, DC Branch 142 members in an informational picket. Top right, Branch 36 members ignored wind and rain to demonstrate in New York City.

If the October 1997 accord demonstrated the willingness of the Postal Service at the national level to cooperate with the union, managers in the field continued to resist including the union in decisions affecting how letter carrier work would be adapted to the new realities of DPS. This became obvious when, with carriers now wrestling with separate bundles of DPS mail and the mail they still cased, a national arbitrator ruled in the NALC's favor by limiting the number of bundles carriers in certain circumstances would have to carry but left to the parties the responsibility of implementing the award. In response, NALC and management agreed to jointly study the relative efficiency of various work methods. Recognizing it would take time to complete the study, the parties directed local union leaders and their management counterparts in the interim to select the most efficient approach to handling the problem, but local managers ignored the agreement and refused to work with NALC branch

leaders to reach mutually agreeable local solutions. Only after headquarters management intervened and the NALC filed grievances did local managers toe the company line and cooperate with local union leaders.

RESOLVING CONFLICT AT THE WORKPLACE

If during the 1990s, USPS Headquarters management occasionally reached out to NALC's national officers to ease the introduction of automation in the carrier workplace, local postmasters and supervisors in many units remained autocratic and adversarial. Management abuse, long pervasive in many facilities, only increased as pressure to "make the numbers" to recoup the outlays for automation grew. As a result, the violence of historic proportions that began in the mid-1980s continued into the early 1990s, with the 1991 tragedy in Royal Oak, Michigan that took the lives of four supervisors and seriously wounded four craft workers having the greatest fallout. Partly this was a matter of timing, since it was the latest in a string of tragedies. More important, supervisory harassment in Royal Oak had clearly been intolerable, as even the most disinterested observer was forced to admit.

The Postal Service finally, if reluctantly, admitted that no matter how

emotionally unstable the perpetrators of violence might be, the undue stress and tension in too many postal facilities had contributed to the violence that had erupted over the previous several years—and that could occur again. As a result, in late 1991, the NALC, the Service, two of the three other postal unions and all three supervisory organizations began meetings that led to an agreement the following May to issue a statement Sombrotto had essentially drafted con-

fronting head-on the underlying problem of management abuse. By signing the “Joint Statement on Violence and Behavior in the Workplace,” management acknowledged in black and white that it would take direct action to remove from their positions those individuals—management and craft employee alike—responsible for harassing, threatening or bullying employees.

The lofty words of the Joint Statement and those of subsequent

NATIONAL CONVENTIONS

Although the NALC was founded in 1889, the union’s first official national convention was not held until the following year when almost 70 carriers from 48 different branches gathered in Boston as a single nationwide letter carriers’ organization. Until 1903, the union held national conventions annually, but since 1905 conventions have been held biennially. The only exception was the 1945 convention, which was postponed because of World War II. Biennial conventions resumed in 1946 and the 2014 national convention in Philadelphia was the union’s 69th convention.

National conventions serve several purposes. First and foremost, the convention is the union’s supreme governing body since delegates debate key issues, adopt resolutions and amend the national, state and branch constitutions. Convention

debates have shaped the course of the union—for example, to affiliate with the American Federation of Labor, to prohibit racially segregated branches and, in 1972, to provide for “one person, one vote” mail election of national officers instead of convention election and installation of officers, the union’s practice until that point. Delegates also set the union’s legislative agenda and, since the advent of collective bargaining in 1971, its negotiating priorities. Finally, although conducting NALC business is the convention’s most important activity, it is also a social gathering for the NALC family where delegates make new friends and renew old acquaintances.

The NALC’s 69 conventions through 2014 have been held in 39 different locations, ranging in size from small cities such as Scranton, Pennsylvania, Canton, Ohio, and

Grand Rapids, Michigan in the early days of the union, when only a few hundred delegates were in attendance, to the country’s largest cities today. As the union has grown, so has the number of delegates, a natural result of the constitutional provision in effect since at least 1894 that allows each branch to send one delegate for each 20 members

—a provision which has been interpreted to allow one delegate for those branches with fewer than 20 members and an extra delegate each time the 20-member bar is crossed. With over 8,000 delegates attending recent conventions, only a limited number of cities can accommodate the union, with even fewer having union facilities, a concern of the NALC Executive Council that now selects convention sites.

Today, NALC’s national conventions are large and complex affairs held in enormous convention centers utilizing state-of-the-art audio-visual technology. In addition to the general sessions, educational workshops and social events enhance delegates’ convention experience.



agreements had limited impact, for the Postal Service refused to take action against supervisors and postmasters who threatened carriers and other craft workers. Although at first the NALC could do little to rid postal

workplaces of abusive, if not necessarily violent, supervisors and postmasters, in August 1996 a national arbitrator ruled that by agreeing to the “Joint Statement on Violence and Behavior,” management had assumed a contractual obligation subject to the grievance-arbitration procedure. As a result, in appropriate cases of management misconduct, arbitrators could order the Service to remove supervisors

from positions where they supervised carriers or other craft workers. In the years that followed, NALC branches filed scores of “violence and behavior” grievances at the local level, and a number of arbitrators directed the USPS to remove supervisors from positions supervising carriers and other craft workers.

The NALC recognized that moderating the behavior of abusive managers was only one element, admitted-

ly an important one, in creating a less contentious and stressful work environment. Another was that in too many facilities, management violated the collective bargaining agreement repeatedly, forcing NALC branches to react by filing grievances. In these workplaces, grievances usually were pushed up the ladder, often to arbitration, thus creating backlogs of thousands of grievances. Justice was delayed and thus denied, simultaneously infuriating letter carriers and emboldening managers.

Resolving workplace disputes at the local level quickly—as well as preventing them from surfacing in the first place—had long been a union objective. From the late 1980s on, the union encouraged joint experiments in the field to create new dispute resolution systems to resolve grievances fairly and expeditiously with the hope that the local parties would learn how to avoid problems in the future and thus develop a better relationship. An alternative dispute resolution process—the outgrowth of both the earlier experiments and top-level union-management discussions prompted by a 1994 Government Accounting Office report critical of postal labor relations—was tested beginning in the late 1990s and, with then-Executive Vice President William H. Young shepherding and shaping the process for the union, more than met the expectations of its proponents.

The process had two major goals: to resolve grievances more quickly, thus reducing the number of arbitrations clogging up the system, and to achieve greater contract compliance, thereby decreasing the number of incidents or occurrences giving rise to grievances. In essence, the grievance-arbitration procedure was reduced to two resolution steps prior to arbitration, with joint NALC-USPS dispute resolution teams charged with resolving grievances once

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Efforts to end management’s repeated violations of the collective bargaining agreement were a major focus of the 1997 Rap Session in Chicago.





the local parties had failed to do so. The success of this system was not inevitable, for without a common understanding of the collective bargaining agreement, management and the union could find themselves mired once again in the grievance-arbitration procedure. In 1998, the parties produced the *Joint Contract Administration Manual*—JCAM for short—containing authoritative, agreed-upon interpretations of the National Agreement that clarified contract language previously misunderstood and helped the joint resolution teams as well as NALC stewards and front-line managers resolve many disputes that earlier would have blossomed into grievances. However, it was only when the alternative dispute resolution system was transformed into a new Article 15 in the 2001-2006 National Agreement that the union reached the culmination of its lengthy struggle to ensure that justice was neither delayed nor denied.

AT THE BARGAINING TABLE

The impact of automation on the letter carrier workplace also dominated collective bargaining during the 1990s—with the NALC, led again at the negotiating table by Vincent R. Sombrotto, committed to protecting the working conditions of

letter carriers in a more stressful environment while also ensuring that carriers were fairly compensated for the additional physical and mental burdens they carried. For management, a lower-paid workforce with more part-time, short-term employees receiving fewer benefits was the goal. At each of the decade's three rounds of negotiations, all resolved by an interest arbitration panel after the parties were unable to reach agreements across the bargaining table, the Postal Service adopted a calculated strategy in support of its position on how automation should be implemented.

At the 1990 negotiations, management first tried to use automation as a club to beat down the wages and benefits of bargaining-unit employees and weaken NALC and its long-time bargaining partner, the American Postal Workers Union. As its "final offer," the Service put on the table proposals to increase the number of part-time flexibles in large offices and expand the use of casuals—both part of its "flexibility proposal"—and create a two-tier wage system by slotting new hires into a totally separate pay schedule with a starting wage—when inflation was taken into account—that equaled

Top: President Vince Sombrotto and

Postmaster General Anthony M. Frank exchange contract proposals as negotiations for the 1990 National Agreement begin. When talks failed and the contract went to arbitration in 1991, then-Assistant Secretary-Treasurer Bill Young helped make NALC's case (bottom).

Letter carriers gave the 1999 arbitrators a crash course in the “real world” of mail delivery in the automated Postal Service, including casing mail in delivery point sequence versus pre-DPS (right) and the challenge of handling multiple bundles of mail dressed for winter weather. Below, NALC members testified about USPS on-the-street observation.



postal wages in the late 1940s. In addition, management proposed reduced cost-of-living adjustments, one-time lump-sum payments instead of basic wage increases, and a cap on the Service’s share of health insurance premiums. The NALC and the APWU immediately rejected these proposals.

Although the arbitration panel that ultimately resolved the contract the following year did not accept management’s most onerous wage proposals for existing employees, the panel clearly demonstrated its sympathy for management’s desire for greater flexibility to accommodate the automation of mail processing by expanding the allowable number of part-time flexibles, and, more significantly, creating an entirely new category of temporary employee—transitional employees—to act as a “buffer” workforce until automation had progressed to the point that the Service could reduce its workforce.

The 1994 negotiations and the ensuing arbitration was a turning point in the NALC’s bargaining experience, for postal automation was creating an

insurmountable wedge between the union and the APWU, leading to sharply diverging positions on key workplace issues. At NALC’s Atlantic City convention in 1994, delegates decided the union should “go it alone” at negotiations, then just days away.

The wisdom of the delegates’ decision was validated at the 1995 arbitration that inevitably followed the breakdown of negotiations when management insisted on eliminating cost-of-living adjustments, replacing wage increases with small one-time payments, eliminating step increases and other regressive and totally unacceptable proposals. At arbitration, the NALC not only vigorously opposed the Service’s “give-back” proposals but also called upon the panel to settle the contract “on the basis of those criteria that applied specifically to the letter carrier craft,” arguing that delivery point sequencing—and especially management’s refusal to allow carriers

to case DPS mail—had made the job of a letter carrier far more difficult, and, as a result, carriers should be upgraded from Grade 5 to Grade 6 on the wage structure.

The arbitration panel was persuaded by many of the union's arguments, but unfortunately sidestepped a number of automation-related issues. The panel rejected most of management's demands, including those for lower starting salaries and the increased use of transitional employees while granting carriers wage increases in addition to one-time payments and continuing cost-of-living adjustments. Unfortunately, the panel denied carriers Grade 6 pay. Tellingly, the panel admitted that an upgrade should be favorably considered when DPS was fully implemented, itself an issue in contention between the union and management. Four years later the true significance of this language became apparent—significance far greater than was fully appreciated at the time of the panel's award.

In 1998, the union again bargained alone. Negotiations between the NALC and the Postal Service were cordial, but in the end money ruled, as management refused to grant the carriers appropriate wages increases. Yet despite the formal expiration of the existing contract, the parties continued bargaining for an additional 90 days and then entered into voluntary mediation. Still, management could not be persuaded to reward carriers adequately for what the union argued was a unique contribution to the Postal Service's bottom line performed under increasingly adverse circumstances.

As the mediator labored through the winter and into the spring of 1999 to persuade the union and management to resolve their differences over the economic package, Sombrotto sent a message to the Postal Service. He reached out to the union's members

who, in response, loudly endorsed NALC's position that, as a result of automation, they were working harder and under harsher conditions than ever before.

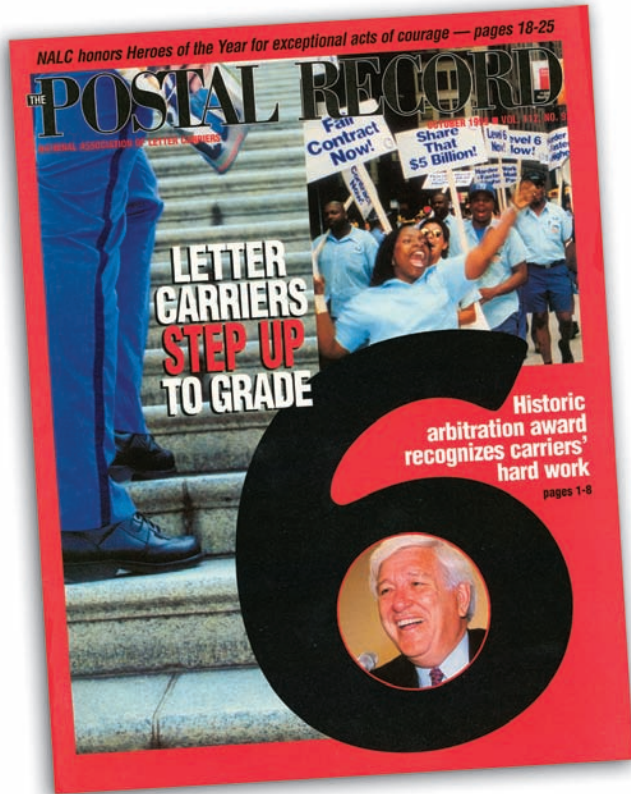
Once the mediator acknowledged that he was unable to bridge the differences between the parties, thus setting the stage for interest arbitration, the union took the next step—mounting a nationwide “in your face” public relations campaign that culminated in informational picketing in front of post offices throughout the country. The union's message, aimed at both the public and management, was direct: due to automation, carriers were working harder than ever and deserved to be paid fairly for their efforts.

When the arbitration hearings began in June, the union built its case around the language in the 1995 arbitration award suggesting that an upgrade to Grade 6 should be favorably considered when DPS was fully implemented—which NALC argued had now been achieved. Moreover, the union argued that carrier wages compared unfavorably with those of workers performing similar work for the Service's major competitors. The union's case, however, rested mainly on the contention that DPS placed greater physical and mental demands on letter carriers—which the union effectively proved through the testimony of a variety of outside experts, national officers and key staff, but especially the first-hand accounts and hands-on demonstrations of rank-and-file carriers.

Together these letter carriers educated the arbitrators about the physical wear and tear of extended time on the street, the great likelihood of injury—especially in inclement weather—the difficulties of balancing multiple bundles and carrying heavier loads



Informational picketing in June 1999 demanded a fair contract.



Postal Record cover at left celebrated historic 1999 arbitration decision that awarded Grade 6 pay to letter carriers. Above, contract talks for a 2001 National Agreement began with calls for a negotiated accord.

as well as additional problems—all a result of DPS.

Sombrotto himself testified twice before the panel, highlighting much of the previous testimony and arguing that the panel should “de-link” carriers from “inside” workers represented by other unions. “Historic parity must yield to present reality,” he said, adding that “otherwise you shackle one group of employees unfairly to the different problems faced by a different group of employees.”

Finally, in mid-September 1999, the panel issued an award that in addition to granting basic wages, continuing cost-of-living adjustments and improving health care benefits, elevated all Grade 5 carriers to Grade 6. Thus for the first time since city delivery began in 1863, the pay scales of carriers were divorced from those of postal clerks. NALC’s advocates, officers, staff, expert witnesses and especially rank-and-file letter carriers had convinced the panel that as a result of delivery point sequencing, carriers were working both harder and smarter under more difficult conditions than ever—and certainly hard enough to deserve an historic pay upgrade.

Perhaps as a result of the Grade 6 decision, in 2001 management approached negotiations for a new contract appearing to understand that interest arbitration was not without risks. Or perhaps a more cooperative attitude was prompted by the crumbling of the World Trade Towers on September 11, only a little more than



9/11/01

Like all Americans, letter carriers were deeply affected by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Although none of the NALC members with World Trade Center routes were injured, all had to cope with the knowledge that they would never see most of their customers again. At left, a Branch 36 member opens a relay box covered with homemade fliers posted by New Yorkers seeking word of missing loved ones.

API/WideWorld photo by Kathy Willens

two months before the expiration of the contract, as well as public anxiety about the safety of the mail stream after letters laced with anthrax, a potentially lethal bacteria, caused a number of deaths and illnesses only a few weeks later. Moreover, with DPS fully implemented and with automation no longer taking center stage, the most contentious issue of the 1990s was now quite literally off the table. Then too, the parties faced a common threat: the impact of the digital revolution cutting into mail volume and, to an even greater extent, revenue.

Whatever the reasons, bargaining for a new contract was by far the most productive in years, if not decades, and, after negotiations had been postponed for several months because of the anthrax attacks, in April 2002 the NALC and the Postal Service reached an agreement that not only included a fair economic package but also “codified” the alternative dispute resolution system the parties had been shaping and refining for several years. Equally significant, the contract’s term would run for an unprecedented five years, both an overt bid by the parties to create a period of stability during which they could work to strengthen the USPS’ long-term viability and a model for the other postal

unions that soon built upon the NALC’s accomplishment.

FROM PRIVATIZATION TO REFORM

By the time Vincent R. Sombrotto began his second decade as NALC president, the union had in place a sophisticated grassroots legislative and political network as well as a highly effective political action committee—the Committee on Letter Carrier Political Education, better known as COLCPE. To the extent possible within the limitations of the 1939 Hatch Act restricting active postal and federal employees’ participation in national politics, the union’s grassroots operation worked to elect letter carrier-friendly members of Congress and communicate to elected representatives NALC’s views on legislation under consideration on Capitol Hill. COLCPE, too, was a remarkably powerful political weapon, drawing upon the voluntary contributions of active and retired members to contribute to political campaigns and thus gain a voice in the Congress when letter carrier interests were at stake. The entire legislative and



NALC’s legislative and political prowess beat back constant political attacks in the 1990s to undermine the Postal Service and decimate postal benefit programs. NALC President Sombrotto is shown testifying before the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee in 1995.

political operation was spearheaded by the union's national officers and staffed by three Washington-based legislative and political professionals, supplemented by five rotating legislative instructors who organized the union's grassroots field operations and trained activists. This blend of a Washington-based nerve center with vigorous membership support had enabled the union in the preceding decade to repel the vast majority of legislative attacks on carrier benefits and programs set by law.

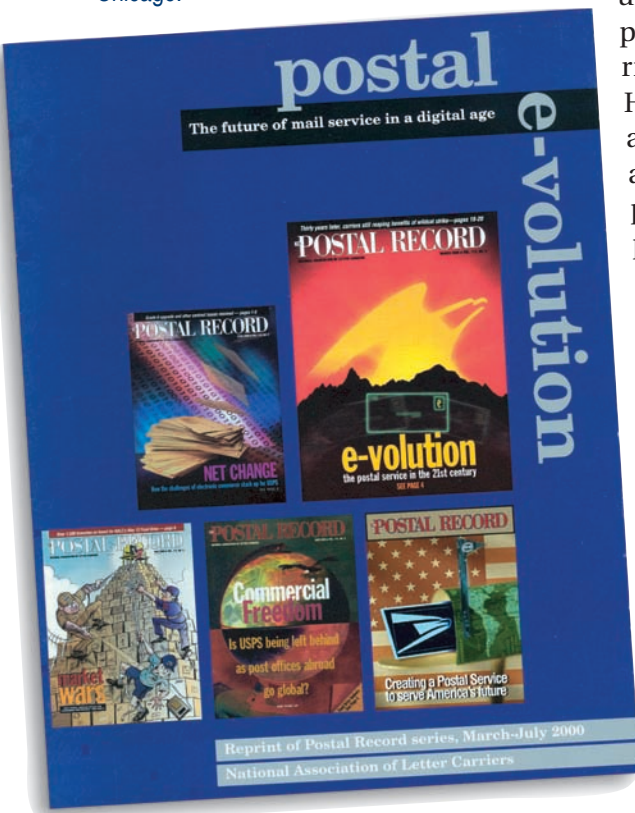
Despite the union's successes, constant political attacks on the Postal Service that undermined its finances and challenged its status as a public service and legislative threats to federal and postal benefit programs, especially those affecting retirees, prompted the union to renew its campaign to free active carriers from the 1939 Hatch Act limiting active postal and federal employees' participation in the nation's politics. Although active carriers could vote, Hatch Act restrictions prevented them from engaging in virtually all other partisan activities. The NALC had long championed reform, if not outright repeal, of the Hatch Act and had almost achieved this goal in 1976. The union's next best shot came in 1990 when, after



President George H.W. Bush vetoed reform legislation and the House had overridden his veto, the Senate fell two votes short. Not until 1993 was the union able to mount another serious run at Hatch Act reform. In September of that year, both houses of Congress approved legislation granting active carriers the right to work in partisan campaigns, hold party office, serve as delegates to political conventions and speak out for the candidate of their choosing. A few weeks later, President William J. Clinton signed the bill and Hatch Act reform was, at long last, a reality.

In retrospect, Hatch Act reform was just one step, although a significant one, in the continued development of the NALC's legislative and political apparatus, allowing the union to more effectively resist a revival of early assaults on the health and retirement benefits of postal and federal employees. "Un-Hatched" active members also helped the union combat renewed efforts to siphon off USPS funds to mask the ballooning federal deficit—a maneuver NALC, the Postal Service and other postal groups had

In 2000 *The Postal Record* published a five-part series examining the challenges facing the Postal Service in the 21st century. The series was compiled into a booklet distributed at NALC's 62nd Biennial Convention in Chicago.



been only partially successful in resisting. Although by the end of the decade, the government's budget was in the black and Congress had less reason to deplete USPS revenues, the Postal Service remained an easy target. Fortunately, NALC's legislative and political prowess beat back repeated efforts in the late 1990s by congressional representatives allied with the USPS' competitors to compel the Service to raise its prices as well as refrain from offering specific products to the public.

The passage of Hatch Act reform also enabled the union to turn its legislative attention to other issues besides combating repeated onslaughts by those hostile to worker interests, the USPS itself, or both. President Sombrotto was convinced that for the Postal Service to survive well into the 21st century, reform of the outdated Postal Reorganization Act of 1970 was a necessity. In 1994, he publicly called for new legislation—"Postal Reorganization II"—to replace the existing statutory

structure and grant the Service the commercial freedom to compete fairly with the private sector and sufficient regulatory flexibility to react to changing economic and commercial conditions.

Beginning in 1996 and continuing into the new century, various reform bills were introduced in the Congress, all sharing the common goal of providing the USPS with the pricing and product flexibility necessary to survive in an economy characterized by the rapidly increasing ability of citizens and businesses to communicate electronically and thus bypass the Postal Service entirely. Unfortunately, however, the Service's competitors and others hostile to the survival of a public postal service successfully blocked reform efforts.

In December 2002, as Vincent R. Sombrotto concluded his 24-year career as NALC's national president, the postal reform legislation he had first advocated and long championed remained an idea whose time had not yet come.



In honor of President Vincent R. Sombrotto's retirement, a special display of memorabilia surveying his career was on exhibit during the 2002 convention in Philadelphia. Right, a group of delegates shows their appreciation for his years of service to letter carriers.

