

An unusual agenda for a special evening



William H. Young

(These are revised excerpts from the address delivered by William H. Young after he was installed as National President on December 8, 2006. Full coverage of the ceremony begins on page 14.)

Good evening, brothers and sisters. I am going to cut right to the chase. Here is my agenda for the evening: First, I am going to give thanks and congratulations to a number of very important people who are here tonight. Then I am going to pause on this festive occasion and describe what has been going on at the collective bargaining table and in the halls of Congress. Then I am going to demand that the Postmaster General of the United States Postal Service apologize to each and every letter carrier in America. It's not the ordinary agenda for a night like this, but then again, you know that I am not an ordinary guy, either.



First of all, welcome to all and congratulations to all the officers, new and not-so-new, on your installation to serve over the next four years. I have no doubt the new team of officers installed tonight will serve honorably and that together we will do our best on behalf of the entire membership to carry on the great tradition of the NALC: fighting for a better life for letter carriers and their families.



I did not think it would be possible to feel more honored and more happy tonight than I was four years ago when I first became the NALC's 17th President. But the second time is better. Being re-elected to this great office is extremely gratifying. The members have endorsed the direction that we charted for the NALC. I spent a lot of time outlining that course in my keynote address to the national convention. You will be pleased to know that I will not repeat that address tonight. But I do want to take a few minutes to talk about what is happening in Washington and the se-

rious challenges that we face in the immediate future. They are just too important to ignore, even on a festive occasion like this.



[This evening], the United States House of Representatives and the United States Senate will pass the first comprehensive postal reform legislation in more than 35 years. For more than a dozen of those years and through seven different Congresses, we have led the drive for reform. President Emeritus Vince Sombrotto first called for a new Postal Reorganization Act in 1994. Vince recognized before most others that reform was essential to help the USPS adapt to the Internet Age.

This is a major achievement for this union. Make no mistake about that. We have passed a reform bill that preserves our collective bargaining rights—rights that many workers at Homeland Security and the Department of Defense lost earlier in the Bush years. It maintains universal, six-day delivery, financed by a regulated monopoly. Congress has rejected all but one of the dozens of anti-labor recommendations of the President's Commission on the Postal Service and significantly improved the Service's long-term financial stability by resolving the military pension and escrow account issues in a favorable manner. It is not a perfect bill, but it will definitely help the Postal Service survive to fight another day.

The bill [does include] one provision that really sticks in my craw. You know the one. The provision that will require injured postal workers—not all federal workers, just postal workers—to wait three days before qualifying for Continuation of Pay benefits. This provision was recommended by the President's Commission and is totally unjustifiable. But Senator [Susan] Collins maintained that she and the Bush administration simply had to have it. [In fact, during the lame duck session], Senator Collins was willing to give Congressman Henry Waxman, the incoming Chairman of the House Government Reform Committee, most of the changes he wanted

in the bill. But [she] would not give in on the three-day wait for COP.

That left me with a very tough decision. Yesterday, Congressman Waxman and Senator Tom Carper asked to meet with me in the Capitol. Neither of them support the COP change, but they feel that the overall bill is a good one...and they asked me not to oppose the bill because of the OWCP provision. As

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much as my gut instinct was to say “No” on behalf of hundreds of injured letter carriers, I knew that I had to act in the best interests of the hundreds of thousands of letter carriers whose long-term job security is at stake. So, yesterday I pledged not to work to defeat the bill and [tonight it will pass].

This union can be damn proud of all we did to make postal reform a reality. I want to thank President Emeritus Sombrotto for his many years of effort on postal reform and I want to thank all of you who did all the hard work at the grass roots level. At a time when Post Offices all over the world—in Britain, in Japan, in Western Europe—are facing privatization and deregulation, NALC can proudly say we held the line for our members and for the people we serve. Well done, brothers and sisters.



I also want to report [on] our efforts to negotiate a new collective bargaining agreement. As I made clear in Las Vegas, our goal this year was to transform the work of letter carriers, to make the job more satisfying and productive and...to improve our members’ job security.

[To achieve this goal], we made two very bold proposals designed to benefit our members and the U.S. Postal Service. First, on health care, we presented an extraordinary win-win solution to the problem of soaring insurance premium costs. Backed by a professional independent analysis, we proposed

an innovative way to slash USPS health care costs by hundreds of millions of dollars. We also proposed that the savings be shared between the parties. Fair is fair.

Second, we proposed to restructure the city carrier workforce to generate hundreds of millions in additional savings. We again proposed that the savings be shared. Fair is fair. In return for these bold, billion-dollar-savings ideas, we proposed a decent economic package and, most importantly, we demanded a commitment from the Postal Service to end its flirtation with a destructive plan to contract out city carrier delivery work. Outsourcing career jobs in the city carrier craft is pure insanity.

Sadly, despite months of vigorous and productive bargaining, at the very last minute on November 20, the final decision-makers at the USPS chose to trash all our efforts. They refused to agree to forgo contracting out our work. Instead, they signaled their intention to follow the low-road of Wal-Mart-style labor relations. Then, earlier this week, the Postal Service dropped on the table the most insulting set of proposals I have ever laid my eyes on: Truly penny-ante wage increases and lump sum payments, the elimination of our COLA clause, the wholesale shift of health care costs from the Postal Service to the employees—how would you all like to pay \$1,500 more per year for a family health plan?—and an across the board cut in annual leave, sick leave and premium pay. On top of that, they proposed a 1 percent deduction from our paychecks—nearly \$500 per year—to “pre-fund” retiree medical costs.

Talk about gall. They want us to prepay costs that the postal reform bill already finances with the released escrow funds.



Let me talk for a minute about contracting out—a grave threat to letter carriers—and, as important, to the Postal Service. I believe, and believe strongly, that the future of the Postal Service will be seriously endangered by low-wage, no-benefit workers who will not share our members’ commitment to quality service. Imagine those low-wage workers volunteering to deliver vaccines in contaminated ra-

radioactive areas, or to assist in other emergencies. Imagine them selling vaccines on street corners. Imagine these contingent workers collecting 60 or 70 million pounds of food for the hungry or raising over \$1.5 million for Muscular Dystrophy each year. I cannot imagine the American public placing their trust and the sanctity of their mailboxes in the hands of a group of disgruntled, underpaid, throw-away workers. It took us decades to earn their trust and continued dedicated service to maintain it.

I promise you tonight that the NALC is going to make defeating the insanity of contracting out our number one priority. Not only will we seek a contractual solution to this scourge in the interest arbitration proceedings, we will also pursue a Congressional solution. In fact, I can tell you that in the past few days I have secured the commitment of a bipartisan group of powerful legislators to work with us to stop contracting out in its tracks.



So, back to bargaining.... We offered the USPS a package that would have saved them \$20 billion over the next 30 years. All we wanted in return was a fair share of those savings and the assurance that the decision makers would not betray us after we had agreed to this contract. And the Postal Service incredibly—I repeat, incredibly—said “No go.” Well, the National Association of Letter Carriers will not take “No” for an answer. We say “Hell no” to their “No go.”

Now, I have a message for the Postmaster General. Do yourself and the Postal Service a favor and immediately withdraw those ridiculous proposals you delivered to us. Then, apologize to each and every letter carrier for demeaning their efforts that make this the best postal service in the world. It shouldn't take a Baker Commission Study for you to acknowledge that your attack on letter carriers was misguided and a terrible mistake.

You have a group of dedicated, hard-working men and women who are totally committed to delivering every piece of mail correctly and efficiently six days a week. Those proposals denigrate that effort, insult and infuriate our members and destroy discretionary effort.



As you go home to your families and celebrate the holidays, rest assured that your union will be working mightily to prepare for interest arbitration, if other means to achieve an agreement prove fruitless. We will put on the best possible case and will spare no effort to achieve what we rightfully demand: a fair contract and a measure of job security. It is what we have earned. It is what we deserve.

I know I sound a little angry tonight, which is too bad on such a happy occasion. People often think I sound angry when I am not—I think it is my quiet, reserved speaking style. The fact is, I am a little angry. But I want to finish on a positive note.

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Although I am upset about the direction the Postal Service has taken in recent weeks, I remain very confident about the future. I am confident because no other union president in America can say what I can say: I lead the best-organized open shop union in America. More than 92 percent of the city carriers of America are NALC members. They know that by sticking together, we can achieve great things. That has been our tradition for 117 years and that will be our future.

I am also confident about the future of the Postal Service. The Postal Service is a national treasure that will endure, so long as we are here to fight for it. NALC has always been a voice for letter carriers and a defender of the Postal Service. Our jobs and our families depend on a healthy Postal Service. We are not going to let our members down and we are not going to let the American people down. We are going to stand up for what is fair and what is right and we won't stop until we prevail. That is the NALC way. That is the letter carrier way. That is the right way. 