

Looking for more than a change in season



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Odds are, no group of workers in America welcomes the arrival of spring more than letter carriers. With warmer days and longer daylight, the job becomes less difficult. Unfortunately, a simple change of season won't reverse the disastrous deterioration in working conditions facing letter carriers in many parts of the country.

Over the past year, under-staffing and the ongoing realignment of mail processing have combined to force many letter carriers to deliver mail in the dark and many others to work overtime that they neither welcome nor desire.

Everywhere I have been in recent months—from El Paso to L.A. to Phoenix—it is the same sad story. District managers, driven to “make the numbers,” hint there is some kind of complement freeze and refuse to hire new carriers as older ones retire. That forces up overtime usage, often in clear violation of the NALC's contract. At the same time, mail arrives at delivery units later and later and carriers hit the streets—and return to the office—later and later in the day. The end result? Unhappy patrons, a black eye for the USPS with our vitally important business customers, and a lot of bad press.

This disgraceful situation became truly absurd during the holiday season around Los Angeles. Newspapers were filled with stories about letter carriers delivering mail at 9 or 10 o'clock at night, some wearing miner hats to light the way while others worked with flashlights clenched in their teeth! So great was the public outcry that California Congressman Henry Waxman intervened repeatedly with local and national managers to demand remedial action.

The NALC has done the same at every opportunity. Indeed, I was interviewed in January on KNX news radio in L.A. during the morning rush hour and called on postal management to do the right thing and fix the problem immediately. This pressure appears to have paid off. In February, the Postmaster General ordered postmasters to ensure that all city and rural carriers in the area must be

back in the office by 5 p.m. each day. NALC National Trustee and Branch 24 President Larry Brown reports that—finally—new city carriers are being hired in L.A.

The crisis is far from over though. As long as the Postal Service refuses to hire adequate staff and relies on extraordinary amounts of overtime in our craft—13.3 percent of national work hours in February—we will face problems like those in L.A. That is why NALC is working on multiple fronts to address this and related issues.

First, an internal NALC working group will soon release a union white paper for branch stewards on ways to enforce contract rules on staffing and to combat improper overtime.

Second, I have asked Director of City Delivery Fred Rolando to try, one last time, to work out an agreement with management to test new ways of adjusting routes, even as we continue to work at the headquarters level to address all the outstanding issues concerning DOIS.

Third, I will submit testimony on the problems facing city carriers to a May 4 hearing being held before the House Government Reform Committee.

I will soon celebrate my 41st year in the USPS and I find the situation we face today sadly familiar. I have seen the cycle repeat over and over. First, the Postal Service runs into some financial difficulties (recessions in the mid-1970s or early 80s) or unexpected budget hits (in the early 1990s) and must transform itself through austerity. It has some initial success, but then goes too far, slashing staff too much and damaging service. Then comes the predictable backlash, with unhappy customers, a lot of bad media and some angry congressmen, which prompts the Postal Service to start hiring again.

NALC may not be able to stop this cycle from repeating itself, but as sure as spring follows winter, you can be damn sure that this union will do whatever it can to lessen the harm it inflicts on carriers and the public we serve. You, and they, deserve no less. ✉