

# Mixing politics, emotion puts labor's goals at risk



*William H. Young*

**L**etter carriers have a serious stake in the AFL-CIO convention next month. The reason is as simple as the old adage “an injury to one is an injury to all.” If the labor movement leaves the convention splintered and weakened, the power of all working people to defend their rights and seek a better life will be weaker, too.

The fundamental task confronting the convention, including nine delegates from the NALC representing the rank and file, is defining labor's top priority. Is it organizing, or is it legislation and politics? Where should our hard-earned dues money be spent? What gives us the best bang for the buck?

Several large unions have threatened to pull out of the AFL-CIO if policies that emphasize organizing are not adopted. While many unions have staked out positions in this increasingly bitter debate, the National Association of Letter Carriers and many others have not.

Internal politics also plays a role in the division I have observed in the AFL-CIO, where I am a member of the Executive Council. A contested leadership election appears almost certain. For my part, I am more concerned about what labor's agenda will be than who will lead us to achieve that agenda.

The organizing faction insists the political route has been a dead end and the way to the future is signing up new members and forming stronger, larger unions to do battle with companies like Wal-Mart.

**This approach carries with it the issue** of mandatory mergers. Letter carriers are dead set against this idea. We do not want other leaders to decide who we should merge with. We know the problems a union faces when it tries to placate a membership with many agendas. What makes the NALC unique—and effective—is that we only represent letter carriers and letter carriers have but one agenda.

Besides, if we want to add strength through numbers, we already know how. In the past we have bargained jointly with our sister postal unions. More recently we have bar-

gained alone—successfully, too, achieving Grade 6 pay. In short, we don't need an outsider to dictate our strategy.

The AFL-CIO's current leadership wants to maintain the primary focus on politics, but this policy has come up short. Despite unified labor's all-out support, the Democratic presidential candidate lost the last two elections and Congress is controlled by friends of business, not workers. Another critical negative is that the labor movement has been tied closely in the public mind to the Democratic Party—including its wide variety of special causes.

**The problem as I see it is that labor has** been painted into a corner over issues on the emotional fringe of our national debate. That is why I believe the time is ripe for us to sit down with representatives of churches of all denominations and other community groups to discuss what we have in common and how we can work together to make people's lives better.

Let's not forget that churchgoers have jobs, and fervent union members go to church. Labor and churches are natural allies, not enemies. We cannot allow the Republican Party to continue to divide us with emotional issues. Organized labor should promote its own agenda of economic justice and not be tied to an extreme agenda, either on the left or the right.

We have a proud tradition in the NALC. Whenever emotional issues arise at our national conventions, we suggest they do not relate to the working conditions of letter carriers and are best left to each member to decide. By refusing to stake out positions on these divisive topics, we give ourselves the best chance for solidarity.

The letter carriers in our union are typical Americans. They do not agree on every issue, but we choose not to divide ourselves needlessly. Both the labor movement and the Democratic Party would be better off were they to adopt our tradition. Who knows, maybe sometime during this great debate someone will suggest this course and a consensus can be reached on a brighter future. ☒