

Making sausage in the Washington jungle



It would take both Otto von Bismark, who compared legislating to sausage-making, and Upton Sinclair, whose 1906 book *The Jungle* exposed the corrupt underbelly of the meat-packing industry, to adequately describe the workings of Congress this summer. Whether it was health care reform or postal financial relief, the legislating got very messy and the ingredients going into the sausages on Capitol Hill turned increasingly poisonous.

This dispiriting spectacle is most obvious with the great national *argument* over health care reform. I could have easily called it the great national *shouting match* or the great national *cluster%#@!* What it cannot be called is a reasoned *debate*. It has been turned into a vicious farce by right-wing special interests that will stop at nothing to block progressive legislation.

Talk radio blowhards and Washington-directed Astroturf organizations (fake grass roots), funded by powerful and wealthy corporations in the health care industry, joined forces to sabotage dozens of town hall meetings across the country in August. Aided and abetted by television networks that thrive on sound bites of conflict, red-faced, angry Americans have dominated the proceedings, screaming about fictional death panels and phony threats of health care rationing, and issuing dire warnings of socialism if Americans are given the free choice of private insurance or a public plan like Medicare. The labor movement and the Obama administration are fighting back, but the momentum toward health care reform has been threatened.

The same dynamic is evident in the debate over legislation that is equally important to letter carriers: Senate bill S. 1507, a proposal to provide short-term financial relief to the Postal Service from the crushing burden of pre-funding its future retiree health benefits. The bill started out all right since it was based on a proposal developed by the Obama administration's Office of Management and Budget in cooperation with NALC. The idea is to restructure the pre-payment schedule in a way that would save the USPS billions over

the next five years without costing taxpayers a dime, or in any way affecting the future health benefits of retired postal employees. The trouble began when the bill was debated and amended in the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee on July 29.

At the hearing, several Republicans resorted to misinformation and misrepresentation in support of what we consider "poison pill" amendments. Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) charged the postal unions with featherbedding (a ridiculous claim in the face of the elimination of 175,000 jobs over the past decade due to automation), bogusly asserted postal workers are overpaid, and presented a couple of extremely anti-union amendments. Sen. Tom Coburn (R-OK) falsely claimed that current law prohibits contract arbitrators from taking the financial condition of the Postal Service into account to promote his anti-union amendment to require arbitrators to consider postal finances in making their awards.

Thanks to e-Activists in several states who contacted their senators on short notice, NALC was successful in defeating most of the negative amendments, including a job-killer to mandate a change from six-day to five-day delivery that would damage the future viability of the USPS, and another to raise postal employees' share of health care premiums from 20 percent to 28 percent. Unfortunately, Sen. Coburn's amendment to interfere with postal collective bargaining and the arbitration process was adopted (see story, page 10). NALC must now fight to have it removed from the legislation before it goes to a vote for final approval.

NALC and the labor movement are poised to fight off the lies and misinformation that so dominated our political life in August with the goal of helping to pass both health care reform and postal relief legislation this year. To do so, we will need every member of the NALC to stand together as one.

It's a good bet the sausage-making won't get any prettier, but we can still get the results we need and deserve. ☒