



2013 Rap Session



Timely rap session provides answers; raises questions

On Jan. 10, a three-person board of arbitrators issued its award setting the terms of a new, four-and-a-half-year collective-bargaining agreement between the National Association of Letter Carriers and the U.S. Postal Service. Within days of that announcement, NALC President Fredric Rolando called a national meeting of the union's leaders—better known to letter carriers as a “rap session”—to discuss this final and binding settlement.

“Under normal circumstances, a new contract would give us more than enough to talk about during a rap session,” Rolando said.

Recent circumstances, however, have been far from normal.

Three days before the union's branch, state and regional leaders were set to meet on Feb. 9 in Las Vegas, Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe announced in a news conference that, starting in August, the USPS no longer would deliver mail on Saturdays—this despite the fact that Saturday mail is both the law of the land and the will of Congress. (*See story, page 4.*) He went on to stage a media blitz in a clumsy attempt to jam his decision down the throat of an unsuspecting Congress.

The postmaster general launched his surprise attack with little advance warning to the employees and mailers whose jobs and businesses depend on the Postal Service. President Rolando learned of the plan in a telephone call from Donahoe less than 24 hours before the planned announcement, well after the radical decision was made.

The president relayed the Tuesday night conversation to the 1,400 rap session attendees, noting how Donahoe made it clear that he intended to go forward with the plan even if Congress renews the mandate for six-day delivery in a new continuing resolution (CR) at the end of March.

“I told him that we considered his move a direct attack on the nation's letter carriers, the Postal Service's customers, the American people and the Congress of the United States,” Rolando reported. “I told him that the NALC would direct its lawyers to take the most aggressive legal action possible to stop this plan,” he added.

Rolando promised the rap session attendees that “we will spare no expense and use every available resource to mobilize our grassroots, lobby our legislators in Congress and seek every media avenue available to

Opposite page: NALC President Fredric Rolando vowed to fight to preserve Saturday delivery service at the rap session.

Below: A crowd of 1,400 NALC members attended the rap session in Las Vegas.

us to get the job done.” But he emphasized that the leaders in the meeting hall had to do their part to mobilize the members in their branches to fight back if we are to succeed.

The postmaster general’s media blitz added an urgent new topic to the rap session’s agenda, the president said, but he called the announcement’s timing, so close to the meeting, “fortuitous.”

“When news of this magnitude breaks,” Rolando said, “we at Headquarters often wish we could quickly gather all of the union’s leaders in a room to talk about it. Fortunately for us, our wish this time was granted. And we will use it to plan our all-out resistance to Donahoe’s disastrous plan.”

A full day

Promptly at 8 a.m. on Saturday morning, President Rolando called the rap session to order. Leading off the day’s agenda were several members of Las Vegas Branch 2502, who sang the National Anthem, led delegates in the Pledge of Allegiance, and gave a brief invocation to start the day.

Rolando then asked the gathered members for a moment of silence in

memory of NALC President Emeritus Vincent R. Sombrotto, who died on Jan. 10. The president also called for the showing of a brief, moving video tribute to Sombrotto, who led the union from 1978 to 2002.

“Those of us who knew Vince will miss him immensely,” the president said. “But his memory will live on for decades to come.”

Next, Rolando got the session’s business started by explaining that, since an extensive array of workshops was offered at the Minneapolis national convention just six months ago, it was decided that this particular national meeting would consist of a single, day-long rap session.

The president then related the roller-coaster sequence of events in the days leading up to the session.

“When Donahoe called me on Tuesday night,” Rolando said, “he seemed convinced that his dubious justification for eliminating Saturday mail delivery was well within the law—that the continuing resolution Congress passed in January to prevent the government from shutting down was not binding on him, even though it contains the six-day mandate. He made it clear to

me that he was going to act even if the CR was renewed after the current one expires.”

For more than 30 years, Congress has included language in its appropriations bills and CRs that requires the USPS to deliver mail six days a week. But in his phone conversation with Rolando on Feb. 5, the postmaster general noted that the current continuing resolution expires on March 27, and he expressed a surprising level of confidence that any new CR would not contain this language.

“Brothers and sisters, this is a ‘my way or the highway’ act of defiance aimed at the United States Congress,” the president said. Even if the postmaster general were right on the law—and he is not—he is brazenly ignoring the clear will of the Congress.

“The bottom line is this,” Rolando said: “If Donahoe firmly believes that he is above the law, then it is time for him to go.”

Next moves

Rolando told the gathering that he was drafting a special letter to all active NALC members to explain the





Director of City Delivery Lew Drass led a presentation on organizing the new city carrier assistants.

dire threat that five-day delivery poses to the future of our jobs and to the viability of the Postal Service. He asked every leader in attendance to communicate the union's message to all members as well.

"The postmaster general does not have a growth plan for the Postal Service," Rolando said, "and without a growth plan, we are doomed to fail. With downsizing as the only strategy, we will continue to lose money, and that will lead to further reductions in days of delivery—the beginning of a downward spiral, from five delivery days a week, to four, to three, to two, to one, to done."

The president took exception to Donahoe's press-conference assertion that letter carriers were fully sympathetic to, and even supportive of, a planned move to five-day delivery. "Nothing could be further from the truth," Rolando said, "something I clearly stated in a second press statement I released following his announcement. In fact, I told him that I would jointly administer a poll on the question of Saturday delivery with the Postal Service, if he would be bound by the results.

"Congress should be just as outraged as we are by this unusual power grab," he continued, noting how the initial responses from Capitol Hill ranged "from good to bad, but some members of Congress have gone after Donahoe, even before I had a chance to speak with many of the nation's top congressional leaders. This authority that the PMG has pulled out of thin air is now being strongly challenged.

"Meanwhile, our focus is not the implementation of Donahoe's plan, but its destruction," the president said.

Marshalling our forces

Rolando announced that, before the current continuing resolution expires on March 27, the NALC is planning rallies at post offices in each state, in crucial media markets—probably on a Sunday. "We want to make this fight about how losing Saturday mail would affect people in each and every state," he said.

As noted above, Donahoe has stated his intention to go through with eliminating Saturday mail even if the six-day language is included in a new continuing resolution. With that in mind, after such a measure gets approved—and assuming the six-day mandate remains in place—the NALC plans to hold a massive rally at USPS Headquarters at L'Enfant Plaza in Washington, "to demand that Donahoe obey the law." (Further details about these rallies will be posted at nalc.org as they become available.)

Financial and legislative updates

Next on stage at the rap session was NALC Chief of Staff Jim Sauber, who provided members with a recent history of USPS' financial situation. "The years 2007 to 2012 were the worst five years in Postal Service history," he said. "As the country endured the worst recession since the 1930s, USPS had \$41 billion in losses."

Sauber pointed out that 80 percent of these losses were attributable not to postal operations but rather costs associated with the mandate to pre-fund future retiree health benefits.

"Making things worse," he said, "during this recent Great Recession, mail-intensive sectors, such as housing and finance, took huge hits—and at the same time, electronic substitution of mail accelerated."

But the economy is recovering, and growth in housing and the overall job market helps USPS, he said. "And with the e-commerce boom, consumer spending and package delivery are up, and that helps us, too."

Sauber also reviewed the Postal Service's quarterly financial report to

the Postal Board of Governors, released the day before the rap session on Feb. 8. "In the first quarter of Fiscal Year 2013, which covers October, November and December of 2012, the Postal Service showed a net loss of \$1.3 billion. But the accrued cost of pre-funding totaled \$1.4 billion, accounting for all of the Postal Service's losses in this most recent quarter and masking the Postal Service's \$100 million in operational profit.

"We have done our part in collective bargaining to reduce labor costs," Sauber said. "Now, Congress must act to fix the pre-funding problem."

Following Sauber was Director of Legislative and Political Affairs Jennifer Warburton, who presented an update on our lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill. "Our grassroots work paid off in 2012," she said. "Thanks largely to the work we did, Congressman Issa's 'anything-but-postal-reform' bill, H.R. 2309, was kept off the floor of the House throughout 2012, including during the lame-duck session. But in 2013, playing defense will not be good enough." Warburton also gave an overview of the legislative landscape for the 113th Congress (*see page 20*).

A strategy for reform

"At last summer's Minneapolis Convention," Rolando said, "we adopted a resolution calling for a new governance structure at the Postal Service—one that provides for a new business model that will allow the Postal Service to innovate and grow, free of the political and regulatory micro-management that threatens to cripple the USPS.

"Since then, the Executive Council has been intensely debating and developing the detail of such a new Postal Service structure," he said, "and one of our ideas is to transform the Postal Service into a government-owned corporation." Such a move would turn the USPS from a highly regulated independent agency into an organization with greater commercial freedom and the ability to attract the kind of board and executive leadership talent needed to revitalize the USPS, he said.

Such a corporation, Rolando continued, would not have to resort to politicking to make needed revenue-raising changes. “It would be free to introduce new products, to index stamp prices to the consumer price delivery service index, and so on,” he said.

“We’re still working out the details on this idea, and we will share our findings with you once the picture becomes clearer. But even as we pursue a new governance structure, we will demand the protection of our health and retirement benefits, our collective-bargaining rights and the provision of universal service.

“Universal service is our DNA,” he said. “Advocating change is risky, but there is no greater risk to this agency and its employees than doing nothing at all.”

In the meantime, our immediate legislative priorities remain unchanged, Rolando said: fix pre-funding, gain access to surpluses in the Civil Service Retirement System and the Federal Employees Retirement System—and above all, hold on to six-day delivery. As he noted to the Executive Council before the rap session, “The PMG’s brazen power grab on Saturday delivery has poisoned this issue—it should not be tampered with in any postal reform legislation.”

But there are many obstacles that stand in our way to reform, he told the rap session. “The House leadership wants to destroy unions, the Senate is dysfunctional, the White House is disengaged—and then there are divisions with other postal stakeholders over priorities.”

To overcome these obstacles, we will need NALC’s state associations, he said. “We need our legislative efforts to work in every state, but we realize that our current field plan is broad and doesn’t necessarily work in every state, so we will brainstorm ways to tailor this plan to include some best practices, to mobilize members to push for meaningful reform.”

Analyzing the Das award

For the better part of the day, President Rolando went through each page, section and line of the Jan. 10 arbitration award, taking questions from

members as he went along.

“We want to give members a good chance to review everything contained in the award,” Rolando said. “The folks back home have lots of questions, and going through line-by-line like this will help us to deal with those questions.”

The review also served to help shape a question-and-answer document that is being negotiated by the NALC and postal management, and that will be released as soon as both parties approve it.

Organizing importance

The new national agreement removes the transitional employee (TE) classification and creates a job called city carrier assistant (CCA).

“Over the coming weeks, we will see an influx of 30,000 new CCAs,” Rolando said. “It is very important that we organize these workers who now have a direct career track thanks to the arbitration decision. They are truly the future of our union.”

But our organizing numbers are somewhat troubling, the president said. “Ninety-three percent of our career workforce nationwide is organized, but our overall organizing percentage has been dragged down by sub-par organization among TEs.

“It is vitally important that we organize non-career members of our bargaining unit as well as we do career

letter carriers,” Rolando said, “because CCAs are the future of our union.”

Director of City Delivery Lew Drass then offered a presentation on organizing, aimed at assisting leaders who must organize thousands of new CCAs. “A 100-percent organized carrier workforce has always been NALC’s goal,” he said.

There also was a special discussion of a memorandum of understanding included in the new national agreement that calls for the formation of a city delivery task force, designed to find ways of improving the work climate and exploring means to make mail delivery more efficient.

“Any ideas for how to make city delivery more efficient have to come from those of us who actually deliver the mail,” President Rolando said. “And they must also provide for the end of the relentless pressure placed on letter carriers by misguided supervisors.”

Rolando used the last hour of the day to take general questions from the floor on any topic. A lively and freewheeling discussion ensued, with many questions answered and concerns noted.

Shortly before 5:30, Rolando noted that no one else was at a microphone and ended the rap session. He emphasized the importance of fighting for Saturday delivery and organizing CCAs before concluding: “Safe travels home, everyone,” he said. “Let’s get to work.” **PR**

Attendees asked questions related to the fight for Saturday delivery, the Das award and more.

