

# A better job, a better union— thanks, Vince



**Jane E.  
Broendel**

as a national trustee in April 1995.

And yes, I was definitely in awe sitting next to a living legend, as friendly and unassuming as he was.

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I personally owe so much to Vince, as do hundreds of NALC brothers and sisters whose union careers he fostered. Of course, every member of this union—including those who never met him or saw him in action—also are indebted to Vince for his tireless efforts over more than 30 years of creating and maintaining the letter carrier job as a decent job, with fair wages and benefits.

Let’s look at this from another angle: Tens of thousands of young doctors, lawyers, teachers and entrepreneurs wouldn’t be pursuing their careers if it weren’t for the opportunities their parents were able to provide them because of Vince Sombrotto.

**Unfortunately, what Vince achieved over his 30-plus years as a union activist, branch president and national president has not received the attention bestowed on earlier labor leaders such as Walter Reuther, who, after building the United Auto Workers into arguably the nation’s most powerful union, helped forge a thriving (and consuming) American middle class in the post-World War II period by negotiating path-breaking contracts in the automobile industry.**

**“A**nd they say I drive too fast.”

That’s what *he* said, laughing perhaps to hide some anxiety as I jetted down an interstate in Northern Virginia on our way to a meeting.

*He* was Vincent R. Sombrotto, or Vince, as he was known to letter carriers throughout the nation, and Vinny to his fellow New Yorkers, members of Branch 36.

At the time, I was a relatively new resident officer, the first woman to serve at headquarters, having been elected assistant secretary-treasurer in 1998, and, in fact, the first woman on the NALC Executive Council when Vince appointed me

Tragically, Walter Reuther would die just a few weeks following Vince Sombrotto’s emergence as a major leader during the 1970 wildcat postal strike. At the time of Reuther’s death, the labor movement’s decline was well under way, leading to the growing economic inequality and shrinking workers’ real wages that mars the nation today. But for letter carriers and other postal employees, the fight for economic justice had just begun, with Vince leading the way. First as a strike leader and champion of democratic reforms within the NALC and then for 24 years as national president, he battled to improve letter carrier wages and benefits, steering the union through seven national contracts, and creating a powerful legislative and political operation to protect legislatively determined benefits.

Vince didn’t do this all by himself, as he well knew. The *union* did it—but the union was strong and effective only because he made it so—made it “solvent, united, stable,” to use his own words in his valedictory report to the 2002 National Convention summing up his 24 years as national president. I won’t repeat what he wrote at that time, except to say that due to his leadership, a financially strapped organization became solvent, branches for the first time acquired the resources to perform their responsibilities for the membership effectively, and constitutional changes were approved that, while preserving the union’s democratic traditions, eliminated the constant political theater and back-biting, thus allowing a united NALC to go forward to face a variety of complex challenges at the bargaining table, on the workroom floor and in the halls of Congress.

**In a sense, with Vince’s passing in early January, we’ve come full circle since he emerged on the scene in 1970 as a rank-and-file letter carrier who, through force of intellect and personality and his never-ending commitment to the welfare of letter carriers and other working Americans, rose to lead—first a nationwide strike, then his branch, and the NALC itself.**

As the postal workforce shrinks, postal management stumbles, and our political allies too often recede to the sidelines when the going gets tough, the days ahead will be as difficult and challenging as those Vince faced in blazing a path into the American middle class for letter carriers and other postal employees. But as long as we follow his example and commit ourselves to striving each and every day to better the lives of letter carriers and other working Americans, and to strengthen the union he loved, we will surmount whatever obstacles stand in our way.

By the way, Vince was right: I *was* driving way too fast.