

NALC remembers Sombrotto, strike

The 1970 Great Postal Strike was back in the news recently, as the union and the nation mourned the death of NALC President Emeritus Vincent R. Sombrotto. As reported in the last issue of *The Postal Record*, the 89-year-old Sombrotto died of natural causes on Jan. 10. Most of the stories about his life related not only his legacy as national president with contract gains and legislative victories, but also his crucial role in the wildcat strike.

As told in an extensive, colorful obituary in New York City's *The Chief-Leader*—a weekly newspaper that focuses on public employees and unions—Sombrotto was 47 and held no union office when the strike began. He was busy running a trucking company on the side, as carriers at the time did not earn a living wage, and had to supplement their income, sometimes through public assistance.

Sombrotto was troubled by how workers at two Bronx post offices were treated after a “sick-out” in 1969. He was determined to see that those whose pay and benefits were suspended would get paid, Sombrotto's son Stephen said in the article.

Sombrotto brought up motion after motion at New York Branch 36 meetings to pay the members, but was voted down. But seeing who was voting the motion down made Sombrotto all the more determined.

“Everybody who voted to pay [the members] were in their uniforms,” Stephen Sombrotto said. “All that said not to pay them were in suits: They were the officers, the shop stewards and the retirees.”

As the meetings went on, Sombrotto got more and more members to vote with him until early in 1970, when the resentment of the rank-and-file members was ready to explode. By March, they didn't just want a vote on repaying the suspended members; they wanted a vote to go out on strike.

The local's officers didn't even show up at the March 17 meeting, leading Sombrotto to take the microphone and

run the meeting to take a vote on going out on strike. The carriers in that room who were for the strike vote knew they were risking much more than temporary loss of pay. Their strike against the government was illegal. Unlike workers in the private sector, they had no legal right to keep their jobs after the strike ended. Instead, they might be fired or even charged with a crime.

The vote was to 1,555 in favor of a walkout and 1,055 against. At midnight, the picket lines went up around post offices across Manhattan and the Bronx. Thousands of postal clerks and drivers in the New York area refused to cross the picket lines.

The mail began piling up almost immediately. The strikers defied court injunctions to return to work. Then the strike spread. Letter carriers in the rest of New York City and the surrounding area joined in, followed by NALC members across the country. By March 23, at least 200,000 letter carriers nationwide had joined the protest.

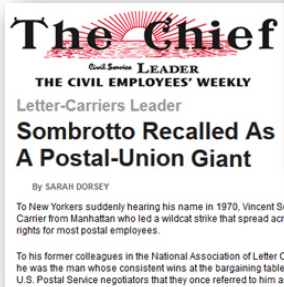
Sombrotto was confident. “I thought we were going to win,” Sombrotto recalled in the NALC documentary film, “The Strike at 40: Celebrating NALC's Heroes of 1970.” “And I never had a doubt about it—they were going to have to give in.”

As the film shows, President Richard Nixon's attempt to keep the Post Office running by sending 25,000 National Guard troops to New York City postal facilities to case and carry mail was a failure, as soldiers struggled to fill the shoes of carriers.

After a week of holding firm, strikers put down their picket signs when they thought the Post Office was willing to



Sombrotto in “The Strike at 40”



make concessions, though no agreement

had yet been reached. Round-the-clock talks yielded an agreement weeks later that included pay raises and quicker advancement in steps within grade levels. Most importantly, the agreement led to an act of Congress that affirmed collective-bargaining rights for letter carriers, finally ending the days of “collective begging” and beginning an era of progress in letter carrier pay, benefits and working conditions.

The strike brought out the leadership abilities of Sombrotto, and his career would take him to the presidency of Branch 36 and ultimately to the presidency of the national union.

“When Vince died,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said, “NALC lost a giant. Vince's long tenure and tireless work for this union, at both the local and national levels, has left a lasting positive impact on all the men and women who have carried the mail since the Great Postal Strike, and on those who will do so in the decades to come.”

As the union remembers the 43rd anniversary of that strike, it remembers the role of one rank-and-file member, who vowed to fight for his brothers and sisters, and won.

Note: The full *Chief-Leader* article can be read on the Postal Facts page of nalc.org, while “The Strike at 40” can be viewed at youtube.com/ThePostalRecord. **PR**