

History redux



Philip Dine

Last month's letter from the editor—and the magazine in general—dealt with history, focusing on the 50th anniversary of the Great Postal Strike of March 1970.

Today, we'll discuss some additional matters related to history, interspersed with a couple of personal recollections.

This month's *Postal Record* includes a feature story on retired letter carrier Tom Riley. In terms of historical knowledge over multiple fields, I've encountered few people like Riley.

An orphan who would later serve with the Air Force in the Vietnam theater, and decades after that in the Coast Guard Auxiliary, he teaches a college course on the history of

postal services over the past 6,000 years; has instructed tens of thousands of youngsters in New York City's public libraries about stamp collecting and the value of stamps; and has written a dozen books, including one on the U.S. Postal Service and the contributions of letter carriers.

Delivering mail, he grew curious about the history of the craft and started doing research, which led him to take even "more pride in my job," because he understood the "importance of being a letter carrier and the historical context." That led him to write his first book, titled *We Deliver*.

Meanwhile, Assistant Secretary-Treasurer Paul Barner has an intriguing column in this magazine—one with a twist—about "Rosie the Riveter," whose poster (and song) symbolize the World War II defense industry contributions of female civilian workers.

The response we received from experts for last month's story about the strike's broader significance to the U.S. labor movement was telling in several ways, including the caliber of those who commented. Some of the nation's top labor scholars, from schools like Yale University, Cornell University, Georgetown University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), weighed in.

That they would take the time to do so suggests the significance of the postal strike. And that's before we even consider what they said regarding the strike's importance to the expansion of the fledgling public-sector union movement at the time, to today's activism by teachers or to the labor movement's ability to survive tough times in recent decades. Or how they said it; these were not pro forma statements, but rather fresh, original analyses offered in extended conversations.

This speaks volumes not only about the strike's impact, but

also about the respect accorded to NALC and letter carriers.

One of the most welcome letter carrier responses to the March strike package was from Michael Murray, secretary-treasurer of Boston Branch 34, who shared some interesting strike-related excerpts from early 1970 meeting minutes, including contacts with New York Branch 36, which led the strike.

In a nod to the notion that history foretells the future (or, as the French say, "The more things change, the more they stay the same"), Murray observed that the half-century-old minutes also "...talk about the same things we talk about today, like five-day delivery and various legislation."

On a more somber note, speaking to an MIT labor professor for the strike package brought back some poignant times. Decades ago, I took graduate courses in comparative industrial relations there from a superb teacher named Ezio Tarantelli, who also was an Italian union official and a professor of political economy at the University of Rome.

Armed with the curiosity he instilled in me, I embarked on two years of research on the French and German labor movements' respective responses to immigrant workers. The experience allowed me not only to apply his conceptual insights but also to get to know the union leaders on a personal level, including the role some French unionists had played in the Resistance during WWII.

Ezio's knowledge and enthusiasm about industrial relations would later spur me to focus on labor as a journalist, to write a book on unions that cited him in the acknowledgements, and, eventually, would lead me here to NALC.

A few years after I'd studied with him, on March 28, 1985—just shy of 35 years ago as I write this—the mild-mannered Tarantelli was assassinated in Rome by Italy's Red Brigades, a communist-affiliated terror group that objected—get this—to his thoughts on wage indexing. Two men shot him 12 times with machine guns in a university parking lot. He was 43 years old.

At the time, I was working at my first newspaper job, as a reporter and columnist in Quincy, MA, for *The Patriot Ledger*. Now, is this a small world, or what? Branch 34's Murray recently told me that he had worked as a newspaper boy while growing up in Quincy, and had delivered *The Ledger* during the very years I wrote for it.

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